



Australian Research Alliance  
for Children & Youth

# Pathways to Community Participation

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**Australian Research Alliance  
for Children & Youth**

## ABOUT ARACY

The Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) was founded by a group of eminent experts and organisations in reaction to increasingly worrying trends in the wellbeing of Australia's young people.

ARACY is a national organisation with members based across Australia.

ARACY asserts that by working together, rather than working in isolation, we are more likely to uncover solutions to the problems affecting children and young people.

ARACY is a broker of collaborations, a disseminator of ideas and an advocate for Australia's future generation.

ARACY has two primary goals:

1. To promote collaborative research and agenda setting for children and young people
2. To promote the application of research to policy and practice for children and young people.

This paper is one of a series commissioned by ARACY to translate knowledge into action. This series of papers aims to convert research findings into practical key messages for people working in policy and service delivery areas.

The ARACY topical papers may also be the focus of workshops or seminars, including electronic mediums.

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Communities for Children initiative sets out to “provide communities with the opportunity to identify and resolve their own issues” (1). As a result, many Communities for Children programs focus on engaging families in community activities. This paper examines the benefits of community participation for children, families and communities; then goes on to look at the challenges associated with encouraging participation in communities experiencing social exclusion. The paper provides best practice principles for service providers on building pathways to community participation. These are drawn from practitioner interviews and case studies. Most of these community participation initiatives focus on adults rather than children.

### Communities and social capital

The communities where Communities for Children programs operate are diverse in their geography, demographic profile, access to services, resources and infrastructure. They also vary in their existing levels of community cohesion, trust and networks. The literature points to economic and social pressures on communities and questions the degree to which communities can adequately support their residents.

Government initiatives often target disadvantaged communities to increase social cohesion through community participation. This is because the development of social cohesion, or social capital, through community participation is seen as having a buffering effect in communities experiencing multiple and cumulative disadvantage. Research shows that communities with higher levels of social capital are healthier and more resilient. The protective effects of increased social capital for children are striking, showing lower levels of child abuse and improved developmental outcomes for children in communities with high social capital.



Social capital can be seen as having three dimensions: bonding (relationships with close family), bridging (networks with neighbours, other community members, local services) and linking (networks with government and other institutions). These dimensions are helpful in thinking about different kinds of community participation. Participation is often discussed by grading levels of participation from tokenism to empowerment. Instead, this paper views community participation as a continuum. As communities develop greater trust and networks, they develop the social capital to support a deeper level of community participation. This paper examines how service providers can assist in establishing pathways to participation by building:

- **bridges to service participation**, by making services more accessible and facilitating community input into service planning
- **bridges to community participation**, by providing safe opportunities for families to deepen their community networks
- **links to civic participation**, by empowering families through their engagement with services and the community.

## Pathways for parents as pathways for children?

Children's access to and use of services is generally determined by their parents, particularly when they are preschool age. Parents who are actively engaged with their community are in a better position to model positive behaviour, improve their parenting skills and contribute to building a healthier and more engaged community – all of which benefit children. The paper goes on to show some examples of Australian and international initiatives which have engaged very young children in participatory processes.



## Challenges to participation

Service providers have a challenging task in building pathways to participation in communities which are often experiencing social exclusion. The effects of economic disadvantage, such as lack of resources and services, can be compounded by lack of access to mainstream services, disempowerment and few networks which can act as a safety net in times of crisis. People living in these communities have been labelled 'hard to reach' by some. This paper argues for moving beyond a demographic definition of 'hard to reach', which can lay the blame on communities, and looks instead to the reasons people are not participating in their communities. These reasons include: lack of trust or confidence related to entrenched social exclusion and isolation; lack of trust or confidence in services and institutions related to negative previous experiences; inaccessible services; political and cultural discrimination; and economic barriers.

## Pathways to participation: best practice principles

The paper looks at how Communities for Children and other service providers have met these challenges.

### Bridges to service participation

The first step along the pathway to community participation is to make services accessible and appropriate so that families access and use them. Once contact and some trust is developed, services need to make their processes of consultation, planning and evaluation open and welcoming to encourage the participation of families. The best practice principles to encourage families to access services and participate in service planning focus on aspects of a service's location and accessibility, staff characteristics and local service networks, and a service's approach and values. The paper also makes recommendations for hosting successful family days, consultations and meetings.



## **Bridges to community participation**

When families access services and are involved in service planning, some trust has developed between them and the service provider and possibly with other families using the services. At this stage, service providers can be instrumental in facilitating families' involvement in peer support programs, volunteering, organising community events or joining community groups. These opportunities for engagement widen and deepen families' networks within their communities, developing familiarity, relationships, and a sense of trust and reciprocity. The best practice principles focus on the role of staff in facilitating the growth of networks, developing the skills of community members and sustaining community participation.

## **Links to empowerment and civic participation**

At this stage along the community participation continuum, families have developed networks with other families, local services and other local organisations. Parents may also have developed skills and confidence and the ability to create positive change in their communities. When people are empowered they can develop networks or linking capital with non-local institutions and begin to advocate outside of their local sphere. The best practice principles look at the role services can play in ensuring the sustainability of community networks and facilitating community self-help.

## **Conclusions**

The paper concludes that community participation has a positive impact on the wellbeing of children, families and communities. It acknowledges the challenges associated with facilitating community participation in communities experiencing social exclusion, but notes that services can adapt their programs to make them accessible for marginalised communities. Services can do this successfully when they have: adequate



resources; existing networks and established trust; the ability to maintain long-term contact with a community; willingness to build community participation into every aspect of service planning and delivery and to work towards community goals utilising community skills.



## INTRODUCTION

Communities for Children aims to improve outcomes for children aged zero to five and their families. One approach is to increase the social connectedness of a family and the strength of the community they live in. Communities for Children aims to develop these networks and connections by facilitating the participation of families in their communities. Programs do this by assisting families to access services, engage with community activities and initiatives, and by empowering community members throughout this process, building pathways to community participation.

Communities for Children practitioners can face significant challenges in building these pathways. The families they are working with are often experiencing social exclusion which can result in alienation and disconnection from the community and from mainstream services. Communities for Children programs can act as 'soft entry' points for families who might be considered hard to reach, by providing universal, non-stigmatising services in unthreatening settings like shopping centres or cafes.

This paper draws on a review of literature to examine the impact of social cohesion in communities, the benefits of community participation and the challenges faced by practitioners in engaging families in community participation. Interviews with Communities for Children practitioners and overseas case studies of similar programs have provided best practice principles which services have employed to build pathways to community participation for families.



## COMMUNITIES AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

Community is a concept which most people understand intuitively but which is complicated to define. Most definitions include a sense of belonging to a place and having relationships with other people who belong to that place.

### Diversity

*“Communities are as diverse as their members or residents, which is one of their key strengths.” (2)*

The nature of ‘place’ and the relationships which comprise communities vary considerably. For instance, the Communities for Children practitioners interviewed for this paper work in urban, regional, rural and remote areas which have vastly divergent histories and cultures. Some areas are largely homogenous or strikingly heterogeneous in their socio-economic and cultural make-up, and vary in their access to existing local infrastructure, resources and networks. Communities can be inclusive and supportive, but they can also exclude people within and outside the community. There is also great diversity within communities, as people’s access and interaction within their community is shaped by their gender, age, culture and other factors.

### Decline?

Some question whether communities even exist, suggesting that the “dominant social and economic order discourages the establishment of community and undermines community solidarity” (3). Putnam’s seminal writing on social capital traced the decline in American community organisations and civil participation over the last 50 years (4). Some discuss this decline in terms of the impact of globalisation and a neo-liberal market economy, where unemployment and under-employment, casualisation of



the workforce (5) and lower wages have given rise to more mobile populations, social isolation and a growing gap between the rich and poor (6). All these elements can contribute to the alienation of the individual from their community, compounding economic and social exclusion.

## **Social exclusion**

The reinvigoration of communities and the appropriation of community development as a government policy has grown largely in the context of areas and population groups experiencing social exclusion (a term which recognises the social as well as economic dimensions of poverty). This is pertinent for Communities for Children programs which operate in 45 locations across Australia in communities identified as particularly disadvantaged. The profiles of many of these communities correlate strongly with profiles of communities which are considered 'hard to reach'. For the purposes of this paper, community participation and its impact will be discussed in the context of communities which are starting from a limited base of social and economic capital.

## **Protective effects of social capital**

Tony Vinson's recent research into the distribution of disadvantage in Australia demonstrates the positive effect that social capital has in communities experiencing social exclusion. High levels of social cohesion were found to weaken the connections between unemployment, limited education, low income and limited work skills as well as low birth-weight and child maltreatment (7), thereby reducing the potential for cumulative disadvantage.

Social capital theory states that social networks have value, and that an individual is more productive when connected to others through relationships characterised by trust, reciprocity and exchange (4).



Community participation – babysitting for a neighbour or volunteering at a community festival – develops and sustains social capital, and the value of participation goes beyond the observable effects (such as the construction of a new local park) to enhance social capital and positively impact on the health and wellbeing of communities (8).

There is strong evidence that children’s wellbeing is grounded in communities and is not the domain of parenting alone. The social capital developed by community participation has significant impacts on children’s health and safety (9,10). Some studies suggest that building a community’s social capital can be a more effective approach to child welfare than child protection systems, preventive services or parenting skills and responsibility approaches (11). Others have found that after establishing community groups, reported cases of child abuse decreased (12), and that shared parenting norms between neighbours and within communities led to better parenting outcomes (4, 12, 13). Clearly the networks and exchange of information between parents in neighbourhoods with greater community participation are of benefit to children and adults.

## Dimensions of social capital

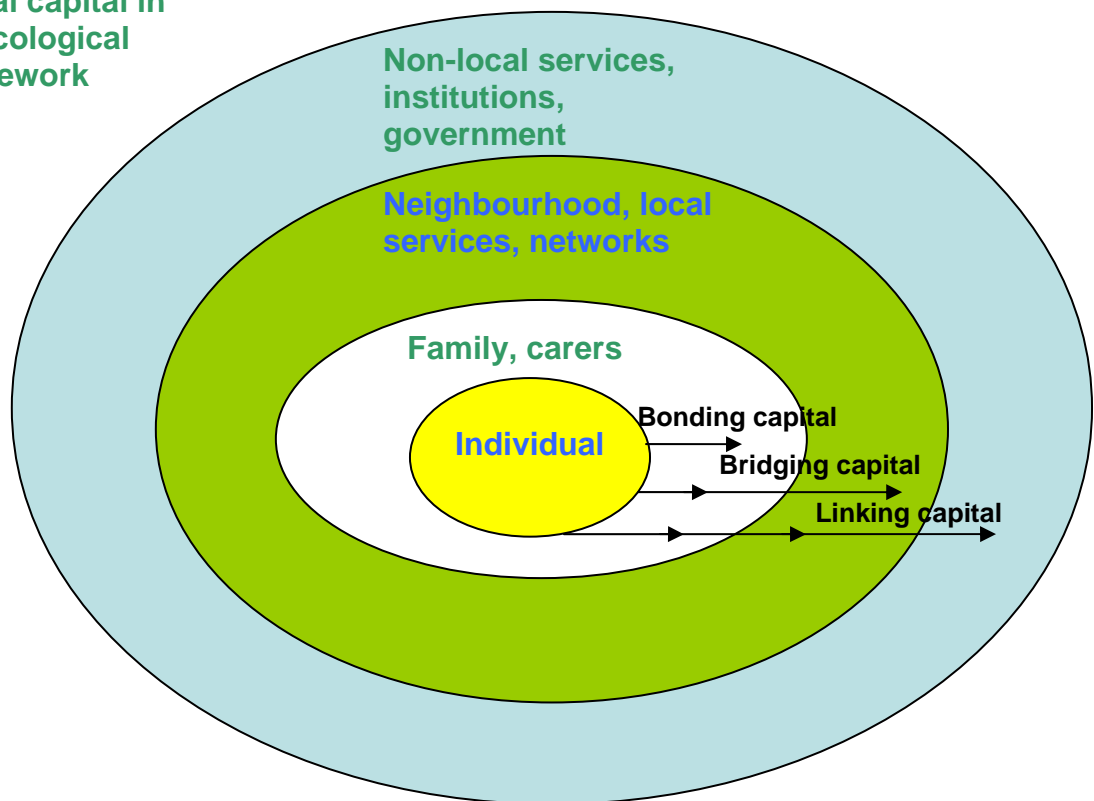
Social capital theorists (14, 15) have described social capital as having three dimensions:

- **bonding:** informal ties with family, close friends
- **bridging:** generalised societal relationships with others in the neighbourhood, local services, networks and organisations
- **linking:** institutional relationships with government, legal system, police, media, unions.



These dimensions of social capital give an ecological (16) or holistic view of relationships and networks, showing how important it is for an individual to have supportive connections with family, community and the broader society. This is helpful in understanding the different kinds of relationships and networks that need to be developed to engage individuals and families in community participation.

**Dimensions of social capital in an ecological framework**



**Pathways to participation through bridging and linking social capital**

Many Communities for Children programs focus on developing bonding social capital between parent and child, assisting parents to engage in their child’s early learning, health and development. Also important is the way



programs engage parents and children in community participation, through accessing services, volunteering, and engaging in civic participation through community activism and lobbying government.

This paper will focus on the benefits and challenges of developing a community's bridging and linking capital through community participation.

Every community is different, with varying access to resources, services and infrastructure, as well as different levels of community cohesion, trust and networks. Programs need to be sensitive to this. In communities experiencing entrenched social exclusion with limited resources, trust needs to be developed before people will participate in programs. However, communities with established local networks and higher levels of trust may routinely participate in local services and be ready to participate in volunteering and community activism.

This is the continuum of community participation, the pathways developed by building:

- **bridges to service participation**, by making services more accessible and facilitating community input into service planning
- **bridges to community participation**, by providing safe opportunities for families to deepen their community networks
- **links to civic participation**, by empowering families through their engagement with services and the community.

## PATHWAYS FOR PARENTS AS PATHWAYS FOR CHILDREN?

*"Children's early development depends on the health and well-being of their parents" (17)*



A core approach of Communities for Children is to engage parents, local service providers and early childhood experts in planning services that are appropriate for the local context. There is a particular focus on engaging parents in community participation through service access and planning, peer support groups and community activities.

There is no doubt that building pathways to community participation for parents has beneficial outcomes for children. Putnam states that “even in the preschool years the parents’ social capital... confers benefits on their offspring, just as children benefit from their parents’ financial and human capital” (4). Research by the Annie E. Casey Foundation in the United States has found that there is a positive association between parental involvement with neighbourhood institutions and effective parenting and early childhood development (18).

Engaging parents in community participation is essential for engaging their children. Particularly when children are aged zero to five, parents are key facilitators of children’s access and input to services, their engagement in networks of trust and reciprocity and their sense of themselves as participatory, empowered citizens. Parents facilitate the participation of their children, but they can also model participatory behaviour and improve their child’s wellbeing through their own networks. Encouraging community participation in adults and parents in particular is key to establishing these pathways.

## **Children’s participation**

*“ Children who feel respected are likely to respect others and to follow positive examples set by adults and other children. Habits of consulting increases mutual trust, can decrease rivalry, rows, violence and stress, and provide effective ways for groups to cope with problems that arise” (19).*



Communities for Children, and other community-based early intervention programs for children reviewed in this paper, tend to focus on building pathways to participation for parents for the persuasive reasons discussed above. The participation of young children themselves is an additional challenge. Engaging children under five in participation is a significant challenge for practitioners, but as Lansdowne comments, “the fact that young children express themselves differently from adults does not justify dismissing them” (20). There is a growing awareness about the importance of children’s participation in service use, and service consultation and evaluation.

Children’s right to participate in decisions about their own welfare is enshrined in international and state law, such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and the *Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act 1998*. Children are experts in their own lives (20) and when their input is heard and addressed in the planning of services, the services are more likely to be used. There are many local and international examples of very young children being consulted in the development of early childhood programs, parks, playgrounds, schools and policies, leading to improved service use and effectiveness (19, 20).

Some believe this process cannot begin too early. Nurturing children’s participation can protect their interests now, as well as help them develop into participatory adults. Lansdowne comments that “children, from birth, start to develop the skills and competencies for participation... the responsiveness and respect they receive from caring adults and their surroundings will enhance and support the development of these competencies” (20). Others are more ambivalent about the participation of very young children, viewing it as an inappropriate, adult-imposed burden.



There is a significant body of literature showing some approaches which could be tried or adapted if services believe there would be value in obtaining input directly from babies and/or very young children themselves. Some of these approaches show promise but require willingness, time and resources. Some examples include:

- a Children as Citizens program in Denmark where young teenagers did research in a kindergarten to find out how much say the children had in their lives (20);
- a forum of 2-13 year olds contributed to the design and development of a children's discovery centre in London. They expressed themselves in workshops using sculpture, poetry, art and story-telling to give input on the exhibits, accessibility, age limits and costs (20)
- researchers used a variety of techniques to determine which parts of a child's day in day care were enjoyable. Using happy/ sad faces was the most effective technique for determining the children's happiness (38).

If there is interest it is possible that techniques used in pre-schools and with school-aged children could be adapted, such as the Reggio Emilia method of early childhood education. Reggio Emilia explicitly develops children's sense of themselves as citizens participating in a community of which they are a valued member. Central to the children's empowerment is their embeddedness in their community and the reciprocal nature of their relationships with other children, the family, teachers, and the community. This connected, participatory atmosphere is promoted by teachers who act as partners in learning, and classrooms designed to be 'the third teacher' which stimulate interactive learning (39).



Some Communities for Children services employed creative techniques to encourage the participation of young children when they were doing broader initial community consultations. On the whole however, the best practice principles which follow are largely concerned with strategies which build pathways to community participation for parents or older children.

## CHALLENGES TO PARTICIPATION

*“Inequalities in power are so endemic in our society that their impact is not necessarily noticed. Power, however, affects participation and it must be addressed if people with less power are to engage in change-oriented activity” (21).*

The literature presented above demonstrates that community participation and its outcomes are beneficial for children, adults and their communities. However, in communities experiencing social exclusion with low levels of social capital, the lack of trust and supportive networks makes community participation difficult (21).

Communities experiencing social exclusion and low levels of social capital are most often the communities in which families could be labelled ‘hard to reach’. Research on ‘hard to reach’ groups lists people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, Indigenous people, the young, older people, disabled and homeless people, single parents, newly arrived residents, the ‘time poor’, renters, rural populations, and dispersed populations as demographic markers of those who might be hard for services to reach (22, 23).

Identifying people as ‘hard to reach’ places the onus on the individual to be ‘reached’ rather than the service to ‘reach out’. This presents a problem



when those who most need the service do not currently have the capacity to locate the resources and supports which can help them. As one interviewee commented *“(the idea of ‘hard to reach’) is interesting from a strengths perspective: are they the problem? What do you do as an organisation if you are having trouble reaching them? How do we make our service more available?”* (24).

Perhaps more useful than focussing on a person’s demographic profile, is to focus on the reasons people might not engage with services or communities, and to adjust services and help communities evolve to address those issues.

### **Lack of trust or confidence in self**

*“There tends to be an accumulation of trauma and stress in deprived communities... this has implications for the community members’ capacity and inclination to participate”* (21). If community members feel disenfranchised and disempowered this has implications for their confidence in themselves and whether they believe their situation can change.

### **Lack of trust or confidence in services and institutions**

*“Disadvantaged communities may have had negative experiences working with people, you can’t underestimate the importance of building trust, it gives people the confidence to participate formally, also if they feel trusted they are more likely to trust themselves and take steps in other areas”* (25).

Parents who have had few or negative experiences with government and community agencies may not be able to, or want to, participate, nor encourage their child to participate (26). In particular, programs working with Aboriginal communities need to recognise the history of trauma, institutionalised violence and neglect that many Aboriginal Australians have experienced through their involvement with agencies. Those organisations



responsible for the wellbeing of children and families are particularly suspect as a result of the transgenerational trauma experienced when Aboriginal children were forcibly removed from their families and communities (27).

### **Inaccessible services**

Services can alienate families through inaccessibility of location, inaccessibility of information for those with low literacy levels or who do not speak English, onerous eligibility criteria, long waiting lists, lack of resources and support. When it comes to more involved participation such as service planning, “the problem of the hard to reach rests not so much with the subjects of consultation but rather with those conducting it”. Services may need to invest more effort and resources for “without such efforts, participation may... simply reinforce existing patterns of social exclusion and disadvantage” (22).

### **Political and cultural**

The majority of programs reviewed in this paper operate in communities characterised by diversity of culture, ethnicity or religion. While these can be sources of cohesion and connection in communities, they can also have an isolating effect on some families who feel alienated from services which do not cater for them. This could be because they are unable to read information provided by the service or communicate with staff, or because the programs are culturally inappropriate. In addition, communities may have few networks because people from different backgrounds may not want to associate with each other. Similarly, civic participation may be low in a community which feels marginalised and stigmatised by other communities and services.

### **Economic**

Unemployment and under-employment can lead to feelings of exclusion



and shame, making people feel like they can't participate (2). Economic deprivation also impacts on local resources and infrastructure – high quality health care, transport, parks, libraries and children's programs are generally higher in number in wealthier communities than in more disadvantaged communities (4). Poor families must live in areas where housing is more affordable, and families may move to a different area to find cheaper housing, thereby having to move away from friends and their support networks. This increases the sense of isolation that many low-income families feel and reinforces the lack of life choices for parents and their children (5).

Service providers have a difficult task in building sufficient trust in communities to overcome these challenges and encourage community participation. However, many Communities for Children and similar programs have adapted their service delivery and program design to reach families that have been considered 'hard to reach'.

## **PATHWAYS TO COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION: BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES**

What follows is a selection of best practice principles drawn from interviews with Communities for Children practitioners and case studies of similar programs. They are divided into three groups: bridges to service participation, bridges to community participation and links to empowerment and civic participation. This acknowledges the different approaches required as communities progress along the participation pathway from disengagement and disempowerment, to accessing services, participating in their community, and sustainable engagement and civic participation.



## Bridges to service participation

### EXAMPLES OF SERVICE PARTICIPATION

Community members use services

Community members are referred to mainstream or targeted services

Community members contribute to consultations regarding services

Community reference groups and committees plan services

Community members are involved in evaluating services

Community members experiencing social exclusion may be so isolated that families do not use local services such as early childhood nurses and playgroups. Communities for Children and similar programs often operate in areas where this is the case. Programs like Communities for Children can provide a 'soft entry' point for families to participate in their communities, building pathways for them to access the infrastructure and services that exist in their communities.

Once families are accessing services, pathways to community participation can be developed by engaging them in service planning and the operation and evaluation of programs. This is essential for two reasons: programs are more likely to meet local needs and so be better utilised; and consulting with communities is the next essential step on the pathway to community participation as it empowers local people, builds skills and facilitates communication and network-building between service providers and community members. Best practice principles for building bridges to service participation are outlined below.



## Location and accessibility:

- Work locally and be visible (walking distance from homes, front yards, parks, streets, shopping centres, corner shops, doorknocking)
- provide home-based services
- provide free or low cost services
- provide universal services to encourage community cohesion and to not put people off with onerous eligibility criteria
- meet with all members of the community in positive and familiar places so there is no stigma for those involved
- provide transport, childcare and access to essential services that people need e.g. phone and mail service, healthcare
- work with the whole family
- work with schools
- translate materials, written or oral, use pictures in newsletters
- your physical environment can reflect your accessibility, with murals, local artwork, images of faces and situations that families can relate to.

### Practice principle: Work with the whole family

In one town, engaging older children has been the key to engaging the children aged zero to five in services and activities. The older children tend to look out for the younger children and be their role models so if older children can be attracted to the service they will bring the younger children with them. Service participation also has benefits for the older children. When the program started none of the older children were attending school. After establishing good relationships with the older children, staff were able to organise for them to start attending school, setting good examples for the younger children who might not otherwise have considered school important. 14 of the older children are now attending school regularly (29).



### Practice example: Doorknocking

A resident had never participated in any community activities before and was very isolated. After several 'doorknocking' visits from a Communities for Children staff member she has started participating in many Communities for Children activities and has also taken her two children to playgroup.

Another resident received doorknocking visits, and during their conversations the worker identified that the mum had never accessed the Baby Heath Clinic before despite the fact that she had two children. The worker organised transport with the Connector bus to show her the clinic and made an appointment for her.

A Pacific Island resident is a grandfather and fulltime carer of two children. He speaks limited English and he has lost his daughter in law, and his son is at work all day. After several doorknocking visits he is now participating in programs and is taking his two grandchildren to the playgroup (28).

### Staff and local service networks:

- Where possible employ staff that reflect the cultural and linguistic background of your clients, employ male workers for fathers' programs, etc.
- work with trusted local people who have established networks
- staff are effective when they are out on the streets, meeting people, talking to them, and making themselves a familiar face
- establish and maintain networks with local services, hospitals, set up a referral system – "this catches people who are under the radar" (30)
- encourage staff to attend events and open meetings held by other local welfare agencies and invite external agencies to give short presentations at your meetings
- provide information on local services and opportunities at weekly staff meetings and pass this information on to parents



- have a community notice-board and information area at the centre and distribute community newsletters
- ask community members to identify agencies that have the greatest impact on their lives and then start a dialogue about working together (21).

#### Practice principle: Engaging fathers

Research shows that fathers are more likely to become involved in home-based or outreach programs rather than those run in centres and to participate in group family events like parties and picnics. Men were more likely to be involved when their worker was male, qualified, did outreach work, and when the service provider articulated that they wanted to be recognised in their communities as an important resource for fathers (31).

#### Approach and values:

- Cultural respect and inclusivity: recognise and work with different cultural expectations and organisations of family such as shared child-rearing responsibilities, extended notion of family, the role of older children, different concepts of child independence, the role of elders, religious leaders (27). Be mindful of the gender and cultural make-up of groups
- trust takes time: “we were trying to engage young pregnant Indigenous women, we tried every week to reach them and it didn’t work. So now we have a playgroup in the park with lots of kids, mums start to wander over, pregnant women start to wander over with their nieces and nephews, now the program is expanding and an ante natal nurse has started attending” (32)



- work with the local situation: just because a program was successful in one community doesn't mean it will work in another. Ongoing dialogue with families will keep programs relevant and realistic
- consistency: "You need to build up strong solid long term relationships to get people to trust you, they've seen a lot of programs come and go and not achieve a lot" (32).

### **Community events:**

When holding family days, barbeques or picnics to increase resident engagement and share neighbourhood information:

- personally welcome people, staff and volunteers can introduce themselves and families to each other
- provide space for people to sit and talk, informal space encourages people to talk, eat, and stay longer
- attend to cultural barriers with bilingual presentations and handouts
- ask people what they think, have whiteboards, butchers paper, craft materials, staff and volunteers should circulate and encourage feedback and engagement
- ask people to bring and introduce their families and create opportunities for interaction between families
- asking people to volunteer or providing sign-up sheets won't do the trick, break people into groups depending on their interests, people from different backgrounds can unite around common interests
- provide the conditions for institutional social networks and linking social capital to develop, invite local decision-makers and representatives from organisations to participate in discussions with community members (18).



## Consulting the community:

- Do background research: “People are over consulted on everything, they tell the same stories over and over again for years and years. (Before consulting) read over research that has already been done, talk to community development officers, land councils, learn from what has happened in the past” (32)
- consult the community before a service begins, establish what resources and skills already exist and which are needed, how families currently participate in their community and how they would like to participate
- two way learning: service providers learn about the local community through consultation. Similarly, the local community can learn about services and opportunities through being consulted. “You have to be willing to discuss the whys: why is school important, why is early learning important. Discuss everything around the issue and then suggest activities to address those issues” (32)
- make sure people can express their views anonymously
- consulting young children: use simple open-ended questions, pictures, symbols, artworks, photographs, scrapbooks
- respond: listening to feedback then acting on it builds trust.

### Practice principle: Consulting to understand

During initial community consultations, a program manager asked what services the community had for little kids already, and the manager was told the community had a child care centre and a park. It took further conversations to reveal that the centre was defunct and had no programs running, and that the park was unusable because it had no shade, prickles, was only fenced on two sides and a bull often wandered in. One-off tokenistic consulting will not tell the whole story.



## Making meetings more accessible:

- Attendance will vary: adapt to transient communities and understand that family obligations come before committee meetings
- establish informal collaborative relationships rather than partnerships. People don't feel locked in, there is no formal hierarchy, people can come and go as their energy and availability changes
- big groups can be intimidating. Try workshops or roundtables where people break into small groups to discuss an issue, do some problem solving and report back
- have the meeting in a park or social club
- one program reached community members by hosting Tupperware party- style get togethers in people's homes and talking about what people wanted for their community. This reached people that wouldn't otherwise have attended community meetings or barbeques like teenagers and older people (21)
- incorporate relevant cultural or religious understandings of key concepts
- explain jargon and encourage feedback in meetings (33).

### Practice example: Incorporating cultural relevance

A program in New Zealand used Maori terms for concepts such as tika/ fairness, manaaki/ kindness, and tautoko/ support when assessing the social capital outcomes of the program. This helped to bridge cultural differences in understandings of family, extended family and tribe (10).

## Bridges to community participation

*"A new park does not make a stronger community. But a community's choice to build a park together, and the process of doing so, does" (21).*



## EXAMPLES OF COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Helping friends and neighbours

Volunteering

Peer support

Organising community events

Local groups and clubs

At this stage along the pathway to participation, families have started to use services and may have had input into how the services operate. Families will have started to form initial relationships with service providers and other families. Some parents may be ready to act as ambassadors for the program, provide peer support for another parent or get involved in organising a community event. These are the activities that establish networks of trust, reciprocity and exchange between citizen and citizen. Service providers can have an instrumental role in facilitating these networks initially when there is not yet a sufficient store of trust and shared ideals. As these relationships grow, norms of behaviour, a shared vision and greater community engagement develop. Best practice principles for supporting community participation include:

### Role of staff:

- Identify and use people's strengths
- facilitate rather than coordinate and be clear about this role with participants, perhaps even develop a statement to define roles
- networks will need ongoing support from staff, it is likely there will be crises, attendance will fluctuate, this is part of the process (21).

### Practice principle: Staff as facilitators

**"A playgroup has tremendous capacity to build people's organisational skills or it's just somewhere where a child goes to play. Facilitation is essential: help others to develop the skills of running the playgroup and then the child or family might be better equipped to make other changes" (34).**



## Use local skills – empower local people:

- “The ability of a community to describe itself, define its own priorities and set its own goals, is strongly related to the degree of change in which a community will invest” (21)
- use local skills: people can contribute in different ways according to their interests, skills and confidence (e.g. organising, professional expertise, resources). Help parents recognise their skills such as singing, sewing, cooking, carpentry. All parents have something to contribute
- attendance may be small for some activities but they can still have value for those who do attend
- involve or gain support from elders and local religious leaders
- offer training in team-working, committee skills, sports coaching, peer support etc. (33)
- parents are effective volunteers and community ambassadors for programs
- encourage parents to be involved in writing funding proposals, attend interagency meetings
- give parents a real stake in the decision-making process around funding allocation, the social cohesion generated through planning can have as big an impact as the programs which are funded (10).

### Practice principle: Engage fathers in volunteering

“My partner worked for Sure Start and she was saying how good it was. But I thought it was just another government initiative, it will come and go, just like all the others. But after I became unemployed, I went along because they needed help with a youth sports group. I really enjoyed it, and then I started to meet everyone and I got more involved. I did the community sports award and starting helping out at the group every week” (33).



## Sustaining involvement:

- Support: people join activities because they know someone else in the group, organise buddy systems for new parents, peer support systems empower the peer supporter and supported (33)
- share networks: a staff member may know a Rotary club can help a group with its activities. If the staff member introduces a parent from the group to the person from Rotary, the network is shared, a relationship is developed, and perhaps next time the group will feel confident to independently approach the rotary member
- activities come and go: activities stopping should not be seen as a failure
- involve the family: successful community participation programs don't make individuals choose between the network and their family. Family members are recognised and included, which also emphasises the link between strong families and strong communities (35)
- develop networks with the rest of the community: engage local volunteers to drive buses, sponsor events, make school lunches
- unifying experiences: bridging social capital can be formed when people who wouldn't ordinarily be in each others networks form a bond over a shared experience, such as shared motherhood, or wanting to continue their education (35)
- the reason people start participating is not the reason why they stay. Sustainable networks create hope, an enjoyable safe environment where people can sit in a corner and watch or take a leadership role, and set patterns for respectful communication
- *"it took a while to earn people's trust and for people to leave inter-family conflict at the door... now Indigenous and non-Indigenous families accept each other more, they are more like equals" (32).*



### Practice example: Building pathways from isolation to engagement

A program running in a multicultural suburb doorknocked every house in the area to meet all the young families. Families then received two more follow-up visits. One mother who was 'doorknocked' rarely left her house and had no idea there was a playgroup in the area. She started attending the playgroup. When her children first started at the playgroup they cried the whole time. Now they are happy playing, they participate more, integrate better with other kids, enjoy activities, and have become more independent. Through the playgroup the woman found out about a mothers' group. She now attends the mothers' group regularly and as a result of conversations there has begun studying at TAFE and hopes to start working again when her children start school. She also volunteers at the centre and was a volunteer at the recent community festival (28).

### Community initiative: Under 12s football team

An under 12s football team was established with children, parents and other community members driving the project at each stage. Bonding ties were developed as relatives could come and watch their children at practice and in competition and parents helped out at training.

Bridging ties were developed as parents initiated their own fundraising ideas and events. In the process they developed relationships with local businesses, such as the local employment service. They were able to use these networks later when they required training in running meetings and the employment service could provide this training.

The Football Committee meetings provided a safe space for debate and forging community standards: "these discussions have a direct bearing on setting acceptable standards for family relationships and community responsibility for children's safety and wellbeing... the common goal and the structures provided by the club seemed to make it safe enough for differences to be expressed".

Parents and community members started to take more collective responsibility for the wellbeing of local children: "people are more aware of who children in the community are. I could have seen that kid six months ago doing something down the street and I wouldn't have taken any notice. Now you're aware it's one of ours." (21).



## Links to empowerment and civic participation

*“Citizens empowered to engage in civic participation ensure that processes of democratic decision-making are legitimate (representative and accountable)... (as well as) building community, civic culture, trust and tolerance... Given the opportunity to participate in public debates and activities, (people) will build civic skills, dispositions and values, including tolerance, civility and the ability to give higher priority to public good than to private interests” (23).*

### EXAMPLES OF CIVIC PARTICIPATION

Community organisations

Community action groups

Dynamic networks with government and non-government organisations

Lobbying council and other government institutions for positive change

Empowerment and civic participation occur when citizens' participation goes beyond input to service improvement and volunteering, to become a way of reconnecting citizens to the political process (23). It is a degree of empowerment where citizens feel confident to represent their individual and community interests and hold institutions accountable.

Community activism around common issues such as unsafe roads or inappropriate housing can build linking capital for the individuals and communities involved. For many, this will be their first experience of approaching a bureaucracy and “the experience of calling authority to account is as much an element of democracy as voting in elections” (2). Individuals can start to think differently about their role and agency and begin to participate in civic activity more generally. Place-based



campaigns also have the effect of breaking down barriers related to gender, age and race, further reinforcing bridging social capital.

The literature around best practice in community development emphasises sustainability as a key aim in any program. Central to this is the empowerment of community members so that they can continue to represent their interests in local services, and maintain and develop community networks. McKnight (36) discusses this in terms of associational communities, organisational structures which empower rather than create dependence, composed of citizens not clients.

This level of sustainable and self-generating community activity may be the ultimate goal of programs which emphasise the development of community participation. Ideally by this stage service providers are called on as a resource when necessary- services are just one part of a supportive community network. In this role, service providers can continue to support a community in their civic participation.

**Sustainability:** Be upfront about the program's timeline. If people are told initially that a program will run for a fixed period of time, people will participate with an idea that they have to "learn how" (21).

**Facilitate self-help:**

- Offer the use of your premises
- support and assist the community to locate resources for themselves, they will "consequently have a much better idea of who funds can be requested from and how. This (is) an important investment in sustainability" (21)
- provide training in running meetings, working in groups, conflict resolution, youth work



- train community members in research so they can be involved in community consultations and evaluation (37)
- encourage community members to attend interagency meetings.

#### Success stories: Pathways to empowerment

“A mum became involved in a playgroup, and after a while she was a volunteer leader. She then served on the school’s governing council. People may come in as participants and then go on to get training, become crèche workers, staff members, and engage in the whole community” (30).

These best practice principles are not new. Practitioners have understood how to build pathways to community participation and empowerment for some time, as we can see from the example below. The challenge is to make best practice, standard practice.

#### Empowerment in action: Aboriginal Family Education Centres

In 1969, 12 Aboriginal Family Education Centres were established which “provided opportunities for parental and wider family participation in learning activities with children, and community capacity-building through participation in the development and administration of the centres”. Five years later they were entirely administered and directed by Indigenous people. The reported outcomes for the children were increased attendance, more rapid social development and adjustment to the mainstream school environment, better academic progress, enhanced self-confidence, improvements in speech, health and nutrition, and behavioural improvements. Parents understood educational processes and purposes and were more involved with the school and teachers (26).

## CONCLUSIONS

It is clear from these best practice principles that Communities for Children and similar programs have responded to local contexts and adapted their



services and approaches accordingly. It is hoped that practitioners will recognise strategies they already employ to engage families in community participation, that they will be able to apply innovations from other service providers, and that this paper will stimulate discussion about approaches not addressed here.

This paper concludes that:

- community participation contributes to social capital, and has a positive impact on the wellbeing of children, families and communities
- there are challenges associated with facilitating community participation in communities experiencing social exclusion where families may have been isolated from mainstream services
- services can adapt their programs to make them accessible, relevant and positive for marginalised communities
- services successfully build pathways to community participation when they: have adequate resources; have existing networks and established trust in a community; can maintain long-term contact with a community; build community participation into every aspect of service planning and delivery; work towards community goals utilising community skills
- most community-based early intervention programs focus on the community participation of parents or older children, with some integration of children's participation in service use and evaluation.



## TABLE OF CASE STUDIES

Title	Aims	Target group	Intervention	Findings	Evidence	More information
Empowering parents in Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs)- one aspect of National Evaluation of Sure Start	Investigate how the activities, practices and ethos of SSLPs created the conditions which encouraged and sustained the key features of parental empowerment and fostered the wellbeing of parents and children under four.	SSLPs were rolled out in the United Kingdom in areas experiencing social exclusion. Many parents in this study were from Muslim Pakistani backgrounds.	SSLPs are intended to empower parents, producing positive effects for their parenting. SSLPs encouraged parents to: enhance self-confidence and basic skills; have contact with other families; participate in peer support and volunteering; become active in effecting change in the local area.	SSLPs developed all aspects of empowerment. Parental empowerment linked to outcomes for children at nine months- positive affects on maternal acceptance, and at 36 months- improvement in home learning environments. Local evaluations found positive results for children, parents and communities.	Data was collected in six SSLP areas representing fairly typical areas for the Sure Start Intervention. The study reviewed research data on local programmes, conducted in-depth interviews, examined SSLP documents and observed programme activities.	The National Evaluation of Sure Start is funded by the Sure Start Unit. The evaluation will study the effectiveness of all Sure Start Programmes in England (524 programmes) and will last for 6 years. The evaluation is being conducted by a group led by Professor Edward Melhuish at the Institute for the Study of Children, Families and Social Issues which is part of Birkbeck, University of London. For further detail on the evaluation go to <a href="http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/">http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/</a>
Stronger Communities	Improve outcomes for children, young	Small rural community in New	Tested models of devolved decision-	Some positive impact on certain	Single case study of one of the seven	SCAF is a pilot of a community-government partnership initiated by



Action Fund	people and families in disadvantaged communities.	Zealand experiencing disadvantage. It was a predominantly Maori community.	making, encouraged communities to identify their own social service needs, supported the development and funding of innovative community-based responses to local needs, developed capacity, contributed to increasing the stock of social capital in these communities.	levels of social capital (using Bullen & Onyx's eight elements of social capital). Majority of interviewees believed that SCAF increased the level of participation in the community, broadened community networks and "value of life". "Tolerance of diversity" and "trust" had more mixed results.	communities involved in the pilot. Results cannot be seen as representative but mixed method research (document review, direct observation and semi-structured interviews) and use of tested empirical tool for measuring social capital yields good validity of results.	New Zealand's Department of Child, Youth and Family Services. Piloted in 2001 in 7 communities for 3 years then evaluated. Social Policy Journal of New Zealand Issue 21 March 2004.
Community Partners Programme	Explore if active community participation is an effective means of countering children's and young people's social exclusion.	Targeted 9- 15 year olds in four urban and rural areas in the United Kingdom experiencing social exclusion.	Focus on children and young people's rights and concerns, group-work promoted personal development, team working and joint action. Projects resulted in new and refurbished play park,	Children and young people: increased awareness of rights, skills and confidence, political awareness,	Used an evaluation framework with monthly quantitative data collection and four monthly qualitative reports. Used reports, videos and presentations made by the children	Conducted by Save the Children over 5 years with voluntary and statutory bodies. See toolkit for practitioners DIY Guide to involving children and young people <a href="http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/scuk_cache/scuk/cache/cmsattach/4130_DIY.pdf">http://www.savethechildren.org.uk/scuk_cache/scuk/cache/cmsattach/4130_DIY.pdf</a>



			wildlife garden and litterbins.	participation.	and young people.	
Father involvement in Early Head Start Programs	To identify the characteristics of Head Start programs which engage well and frequently with resident and non-resident fathers from different racial backgrounds.	Fathers of children involved in Early Head Start program from 261 programs across US, from diverse range of ethnic, age and geographical groups.	Interventions varied from home-based, centre-based and mixed programs, with or without male staff and coordinators.	Programs that engaged well with fathers tended to have outreach programs, were staffed by men, run by a father involvement coordinator, with all staff trained in working with fathers.	Qualitative (focus groups) and quantitative (survey) data completed by 261 of a possible 416 respondents.	Part of the Head Start evaluation conducted over seven years until 2002. <a href="http://ccfl.unl.edu/projects/pdf/Final_Father_Involvement_Report.pdf">http://ccfl.unl.edu/projects/pdf/Final_Father_Involvement_Report.pdf</a>
Children, Young People, Parents and Carers' Participation in Children's Fund Case Study Partnerships	Program aims to build resilience among children and young people aged 5- 13 which focuses on prevention	Multi-agency partnerships in England which work to improve preventative services to enhance children's life chances	Group-work promoting individual personal development, team working and joint action. The projects evolved according to the needs, agenda and capacity of the children involved.	Explored effectiveness of different models of collaboration that have emerged in local partnerships and impact of Children's Fund on outcomes for children.	6 case studies	University of Birmingham Evaluation <a href="http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR602.pdf">http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR602.pdf</a>
The Shared Action	Three year community	Residents of Long Gully, emphasis on	Community development work	Increased social capital- networks,	Reflections of the program's	Linda Beilharz, coordinator of Shared Action Evaluation of Shared Action



experience 1997-1999 and Shared Action Evaluation 2003	development project, promote safety and wellbeing of children in Long Gully, Bendigo.	child protection.	with adults and groups to mobilise resources and undertake community building initiatives. E.g. community park, local football team, community concert.	responsibility of adults for children, reciprocal support., social support, increased numbers of people studying, increased participation and leadership, increased investment by health, welfare and govt agencies in Long Gully, increased skills and access to resources.	coordinator and her conversations with staff and community members. Community Index survey, regular interviews with staff for 'chronicling', interviews with community members and key informants and attendance at Reference Group Meetings.	<a href="http://www.stlukes.org.au/services/communitybuilding/documents/SharedActionEvaluation2002.pdf">http://www.stlukes.org.au/services/communitybuilding/documents/SharedActionEvaluation2002.pdf</a>
Lawrence Community Works	Social network development is employed to connect residents with one another and local institutions, build collective action and generate neighbourhood	Local families, predominantly Latino background.	400 families engaged in family asset building, community revitalisation, leadership training, youth development, and financial independence for women with a staff of 20 and a network membership of 700	New affordable housing and playgrounds built, bridging links to institutional networks have increased the power of Lawrence residents to obtain resources for, and attention to, their	Dialogues with 18 stakeholders.	The Annie E. Casey Foundation's series of reports on social networks. <a href="http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/tapping.pdf">http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/tapping.pdf</a> <a href="http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/ties.pdf">http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/ties.pdf</a> <a href="http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/relationships.pdf">http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/relationships.pdf</a>



	improvements.		residents.	community.		
Family Independence Initiative	Work with low-income families to help them move from poverty to self-sufficiency.	Low income families, many of them first-generation immigrants.	Strengths-based family network approach to breaking the cycle of poverty. Uses family incentives, waivers of welfare income requirements, and social networks, FII creates affinity groups of low-income families with similar backgrounds.	Within two years, FII participants increased their average monthly income by 26%. All families opened a bank account, average family savings increased by 141%. Nine families became homeowners, and 21 out of 25 uninsured families obtained health insurance.	Dialogues with 11 stakeholders.	The Annie E. Casey Foundation's series of reports on social networks. <a href="http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/tapping.pdf">http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/tapping.pdf</a> <a href="http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/ties.pdf">http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/ties.pdf</a> <a href="http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/relationships.pdf">http://www.aecf.org/upload/PublicationFiles/relationships.pdf</a>
Making connections: An evaluation of the Community Participation Programmes	Support community activity in disadvantaged neighbourhoods, gain skills and knowledge for neighbourhood renewal.	Disadvantaged neighbourhoods.	Give funding for activities, access to training and opportunities, involving locals in decision-making.	This intervention has reached people that haven't been reached before, new networks established.	Year-long independent evaluation, questionnaires, workshops, interviews.	<a href="http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk/activecommunities/activecommunities78.htm">http://www.crimereduction.gov.uk/activecommunities/activecommunities78.htm</a>



## METHODOLOGY

This paper sought to establish: what is community participation in the context of Communities for Children and what are its dimensions; why is community participation beneficial for children, parents and communities; what are the barriers to community participation for hard to reach families; and how do Communities for Children and similar programs overcome these barriers in order to build pathways to community participation for children and families.

We approached this paper in three stages: a literature review; practitioner interviews and peer review.

### Literature review

The literature for this paper was located using several social science databases including:

- APA – FT – Australian Public Affairs Full Text
- ASSDA – Australian Social Science Data Archive
- FAMILY – Australian Family and Society Abstracts
- Family and Society Studies Worldwide
- Social Science Journals – ProQuest

Sources were also located in The Benevolent Society's substantial library, by using Google and Google scholar, and through the bibliographies of existing papers and publications.

This paper draws on diverse sources, including social capital theory, community development, children's participation, client participation and literature on hard to reach families. Lessons for practice were drawn from evaluations of overseas programs similar to Communities for Children, as well as programs targeting community participation and children and young



people's participation more generally. The literature was particularly helpful in drawing out general principles as well as targeted strategies for engaging specific groups that can be harder to engage such as fathers, young people and those of from non-English speaking backgrounds.

### **Practitioner interviews**

Seven Communities for Children practitioners were interviewed including staff from facilitating partners and community partners. Staff from these programs were approached due to the diversity of the communities they operate in, in regards to demography, location and existing services and infrastructure. The semi-structured interviews were between 30 and 60 minutes in length. We sought an understanding of the differing contexts in which Communities for Children operates, including the varying challenges and approaches to building pathways to community participation for hard to reach families.

### **Peer review**

When the content from the literature review and interviews had been gathered and written up, the initial draft was workshopped with two staff from The Benevolent Society's Communities for Children programs in Campbelltown and Wyong Shire, Southern Lakes. These practitioners were instrumental in assessing the content and making recommendations as to the paper's structure and flow.

The paper was shaped according to these recommendations, and then forwarded to our academic partners. The academic partners had given advice in the planning of the literature review and interviews, and at this stage they assessed the entire paper and made their recommendations.



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