

Submission to Standing Committee on Health and Disability Inquiry into the early intervention and care of vulnerable infants in the ACT

Families ACT (FACT) Inc

Families ACT (FACT) was established in 2006 as a peak body representing the interests of families and the range of services which support families and individuals in the ACT and surrounding region. FACT advocates on behalf of families, aims to represent the interests of family support providers in the ACT and surrounding region, contribute to policy development and evaluation and provide sector development. FACT seeks to work collaboratively with the ACT Government, agencies providing family and individual services and families to ensure the integration of services to support families in the ACT.

FACT is governed by a Management Committee which comprises 10 members who represent agencies providing family support services in the ACT and surrounding region. Attached is a list of the FACT member organisations.

FACT is very pleased to have this opportunity to contribute to this inquiry. Ensuring the care and protection of children, particularly very young and vulnerable children must be one of the highest priorities for Government and the community alike.

What are the issues facing families?

There is widespread agreement from all sectors of society that families are the best providers of care and nurturing for children. The sad reality for some children is that for many and often complex reasons their family cannot provide this care in such a way that enables that child to grow and develop and reach their full potential. The issues are well known and include drug and alcohol abuse, mental health issues, poverty and social isolation. Many children and their families in the ACT are facing a number of issues which may potentially impact on their capacity to provide a caring and nurturing environment for their children.

In a recent survey FACT member organisations were asked from their experience, what are some of the issues facing the families they work with. Many common themes emerged. Issues around drug and alcohol abuse and mental health issues of both parents and children were frequently mentioned. As well as these internal stresses many of these families also faced external stress from financial and housing issues. Agencies have seen an increase in the number of families seeking assistance in meeting their family's most basic needs for shelter and food. And for many families the extra costs associated with school and other activities such as sport are prohibitive and result in further isolation and disadvantage. Other factors which exacerbate these difficulties include lack of family and other supports, and the need for adequate services such as community services and sporting facilities to be provided in new and expanding areas of the ACT.

For most agencies working with families the complexity of the issues these families are facing was of great concern, often multiple stressors and factors were involved. For many families these issues become inter generational and family support workers are now working with young mothers who they worked with previously as children.

How Can Family Support Services Help?

The services FACT represents provide a range of services to families with dependent children in the community. For many of these families their capacity to function is limited by internal or external stresses of life. These services aim to focus on strengthening and supporting families, building on family members existing skills. Family support is mainly concerned with encouraging and developing positive relationships within families and promoting environments which value, nurture and protect children and young people.

The services provided fall into three main categories:

Primary

These services aim to identify and reduce factors/vulnerabilities associated with risk by increasing the resilience of children, young people, parents and principal carers and improving parenting capacity. Services include referral and provision of information, general support and social support groups. A service such as Parentline would fit into this category.

Secondary

These services aim to intervene early in the life of the problem or early in the life of a child. Families may have been identified with one or a number of vulnerabilities which may in the future impact adversely on their parenting capacity or on the well being of children. These vulnerabilities include: family violence, parental drug or alcohol abuse, parental mental health issues, lack of support, parents with a disability, financial and/or housing stress.

Services provided include outreach support, parent education and personal skills development, social support groups, and case managed family support.

Tertiary

These interventions take place when there is evidence of at least one identified vulnerability directly impacting on parenting capacity or the well being of children. Services include home visiting programs, therapeutic interventions, case managed family support and reviews involving more than one service provider.

Early intervention

Growing evidence has emerged from a wide research base in health, developmental psychology, neuroscience, education and criminology of the importance of promoting positive family and community experiences for young children during the earliest years of childhood. The importance of early childhood prevention and early intervention programs is based on the premise that the first few years of life of a child's development are crucial in setting the foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour and health outcomes.

Early intervention activities may be carried out at the individual, family, and/or community level and can be tailored to meet the needs of different cultural groups. Early intervention services that may have a positive impact on children and families include: home visiting services for pregnant women and families with new babies, parenting skills training, family relationship education, family counselling and support services for families with very young children such as playgroups, all of which stimulate brain development. (from **The Benefits of Early Intervention**, by Ellen Fish, *Stronger Families Learning Exchange Bulletin* No.2 Spring/Summer 2002.)

FACT member organisations have a strong belief in and commitment to early intervention approaches. The *2004 Review of Family Support Services in the ACT*, recognised the importance of prevention and early intervention, but not to the exclusion of the provision of tertiary-based services. As stated in the report (Pg6), "Early intervention may be 'in the life of the child' or in the 'life of the problem'. Early childhood services by providing early intervention and early support are highly effective in preventing or reducing more intrusive and costly interventions later on in life. For family support services early intervention in the development of problems also prevents or reduces more intrusive and costly interventions if families develop more complex problems and experience more crises."

The Office for Children Youth and Family Support (OCYFS) administers the Family Support Grants Program (FSGP) which currently provides funding of \$2,450,178 to 19 Community Organisations delivering 24 services to vulnerable families in the ACT. The current contracts are under review and the sector has been informed that the FSGP will have an increased focus on those more complex families, those with high and complex needs. While FACT agrees that it is important to target these families and provide the necessary levels of support, this focus must not be to the detriment of an early intervention focus. Services have been told that these changes will occur without any additional resources, and therefore there is some concern that focussing on families with high and complex needs will result in less time and less resources to work with those families who are yet to reach that stage. It is important that this does not occur, and FACT would advocate that whilst the focus on families with high and complex needs is important, this should be accompanied by additional resources directed towards increasing the capacity for services to provide an early intervention focus.

Collaboration

Another key finding of the *2004 Review of Family Support Services in the ACT* was the importance of collaborative practice. It was identified that many family issues are becoming increasingly complex and no one service can address all these issues. The report recommended that an integrated family support services system be developed that includes sustainable linkages between relevant federal and ACT government departments and between these departments and the community sector at a policy and operational level. As well as the development of more flexible methods of funding to facilitate flexible and integrated service delivery.

Since this report the Integrated Family Support Project (IFSP) has been established. The project is targeted at families with young children, and provides a case managed approach to providing an integrated service. Relevant government departments and community organisations are involved in the project and it is a real attempt to overcome some of the difficulties families have in negotiating a range of different services and departments. A considerable number of FACT members have been involved in the initial stage of this project and whilst the project has highlighted some of the difficulties inherent in collaborative practice, FACT supports the overall directions of the project. It is vital as the project develops that the community sector remain involved as partners and funding models and levels need to reflect this.

Conclusion

FACT believes the provision of family support programs which respond early to the needs of families by providing programs that treat families in a holistic and integrated manner can be of great assistance in the identification of and support to vulnerable families in the ACT. Family support workers develop a unique and ongoing relationship with the families they work with and they do this in a non-threatening way. They are therefore a crucial component of an integrated approach to service delivery to vulnerable children and their families.

One of the big issues facing family support services is resourcing. These services constitute a very small part of child welfare expenditure, yet the potential impact on the lives of families is enormous. It is crucial to invest significant resources at the level of family support to prevent further problems down the track. Victoria is the only state which has seen a reduction in the number of kids coming into the care system and they attribute this largely to a tripling in the funding to family support services in that state. As a relatively small jurisdiction, the ACT has a unique opportunity to turnaround the lives of children from a very young age.

Member Organisations/Individuals Families ACT (FACT)
The YWCA of Canberra
Marymead Child & Family Centre
Woden Community Service Inc.
Barnardos Australia
Gungahlin Regional Community Service
Laura Turnbull OAM
Bobbi Cook
Northside Community Service Inc.
Communities@Work Inc.
Belconnen Community Service
ParentLine ACT
ADFACT
Centacare
The Smith Family
Foster Care Association of the ACT
Relationships Australia Canberra & Region
Canberra Mothercraft Society
Domestic Violence Crisis Service
Office for Children, Youth & Family Support
Canberra Fathers & Children Service Inc.
Canberra One Parent Family Support Service - Birthright
Queanbeyan Family Support
Family Based Respite Care Inc.
Women's Information and Referral Centre
Alison Cook
Ingrid Wallace
Bernadette Backer
Stephanie Leishman
ACTCOSS
Kate Price