

‘FAMILIES FIRST - A SUPPORT NETWORK FOR FAMILIES RAISING CHILDREN IN NSW’

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Thank you for the opportunity to tell you about Families First.

I am responsible for coordinating the development and implementation of Families First which is a major commitment by the NSW Government to primary prevention and early intervention.

At heart, Families First in NSW is about coordinating existing support and expanding services for families to provide the best support possible to children during their first 3 years.

Today I will give you an overview of Families First, focusing on:

- what Families First is trying to achieve for families
- why have Families First
- *its features*
- the changes needed to how we support families
- the forward direction for Families First.

What is Families First trying to achieve for families?

Families First is about helping all parents to give their children a good start in life. It is a strategy that focuses on improving the environment for children aged 0-3; ensuring that families are fully supported during these years, thus enabling them to nurture their child as fully as possible. It is also about supporting families during their children’s early primary school years.

We want to do this by increasing the effectiveness of prevention and early intervention services. Families First acknowledges that parenting can be a tough job and that all families, at various points in time, need information and support.

Families First has a strategic vision. It is designed to achieve a number of outcomes, covering a number of domains. Many of these outcomes can only be evaluated over 10-15 years.

The outcomes are:

- ⇒ healthier children and parents
- ⇒ better functioning families who are able to enjoy and learn from one another
- ⇒ children who are better prepared to learn and develop when they start school
- ⇒ reduction in the conditions that lead to mental health problems in children (such as conduct disorder)

- ⇒ improved recognition and early intervention for post natal depression and other mental health problems in parents with new babies
- ⇒ greater parental participation in education and training
- ⇒ communities whose members interact more positively and which are friendly places to bring up children
- ⇒ reduction in the conditions that lead to child abuse and neglect
- ⇒ reduction in juvenile and adult crime.

As you would appreciate, no agency, alone, can strive to achieve these outcomes. It takes a combined effort of many agencies which are headed in the same direction. Families First now provides this direction in NSW.

Why have Families First?

In NSW there are approximately 87,000 births each year. About 35,000 of these births are first borns; meaning that each year there are 35,000 new families in NSW and approximately 70,000 people take on the role of parenting for the first time. Like most jobs over the last twenty years or so, the role and challenges of parenting have changed significantly. Once upon a time, most children were cared for by their mother until they were school age and mothers were supported either by the extended family or through community networks.

The challenges for today's parents and the supports available are much different. Many families today are faced with the twin ambitions of having to provide two incomes to ensure financial stability and providing adequate time to interact and care for their children. Families are also more often isolated as a result of living away from extended families or the lack of community networks.

In addition to the new challenges facing today's parents, we also now know more about the importance of the first three years of a child's life. New knowledge about the brain has changed the way we think about early childhood experiences. We now know that early experiences and stimulating positive interactions with adults and other children play a crucial role in the development and wiring of the brain. Some of this new thinking about the brain is outlined below:

RETHINKING THE BRAIN

OLD THINKING

How a brain develops depends on the genes with which you were born

The experiences you have before age three have a limited impact on later development.

A secure relationship with a primary care giver creates a favourable context for early development and learning.

NEW THINKING

How a brain develops hinges on a complex **interplay** between the genes you are born with and the **experiences** you have.

Early experiences have a **decisive impact** on the architecture of the brain, and on the nature and extent of adult capacities.

Early **interactions** don't just create the context, they **directly affect** the way the brain is **"wired"**.

OLD THINKING

Brain development is **linear**: the brain's capacity to learn and change grows steadily as an infant progresses towards adulthood.

A toddler's brain is much **less active** than the brain of a college student.

NEW THINKING

Brain development is **non-linear**: there are prime times for acquiring different kinds of knowledge and skills.

By the time children reach age three, their brains are **twice as active** as those of adults. Activity levels drop during adolescence.

Shore, R.(1997) Rethinking the Brain

We know that the changing role of parenting is providing new challenges to our institutions. We know more than ever that the way we support and care for young children is crucial to their future development.

Thankfully, there is a growing body of research on how we can provide the best support for parents and their children. The following research studies have shown that support activities early in a child's life can have an impact on their future health and education, involvement in juvenile crime, success in the workforce and their resilience to cope with stress later on in life.

Firstly, the results of the Elmira Project by Dr David Olds and Hawaii Healthy Start have provided strong evidence of the benefits of providing support in the home to vulnerable mothers. The better health and social outcomes achieved for the mothers and children in these studies needs to be achieved across the board for vulnerable Australian families.

Similarly, the Perry Preschool program in Michigan demonstrated that greater support for disadvantaged children can enhance their school-readiness. This enhanced capacity increases their long-term educational achievements and decreases their participation in crime.

We also know that prevention and early intervention services have the greatest impact when they are capable of addressing a broad range of issues and are provided as part of a co-ordinated network of services.

Finally, James Garbarino's pioneering work in Chicago around the impact of communities on children's life shows that how connected people feel and their level of trust can be linked with higher or lower risk of child abuse and neglect. This is a very important result to bear in mind for anyone concerned with trying to improve outcomes for children.

There are, of course, a myriad of issues that arise when trying to turn these research findings into effective interventions and services that produce better outcomes for children. The Families First strategy represents the NSW Government's way forward to address these issues and provide the support that is needed by parents.

Features of Families First

Families First guides five NSW government departments to jointly plan how services can better meet the needs of children and families.

Families First asks all staff who support families with young children to:

- ⇒ focus on the needs of very young children
- ⇒ provide both universal - ‘non stigmatising’ – services and targeted services for families
- ⇒ develop prevention and early intervention services into local networks
- ⇒ expand home based support for families by professionals and volunteers
- ⇒ Deliver services in a range of settings where families congregate

Importantly, Families First is not a new ‘program’ but a ‘strategy’. It is not something extra we have to do – it is about how we, as professionals, support families.

A good way to think about Families First is that it is a large umbrella. The umbrella describes:

- ⇒ the outcomes we are aiming to achieve for children, families and communities
- ⇒ the principles which will now guide our work with families.

The umbrella shades a range of services provided or funded by the NSW Departments of Health, Community Services, Ageing and Disability, Education and Training and Housing. It also shades many non-government services funded by the NSW Government.

These services will now join together to form service networks in local communities. The networks will provide us with the way to:

- ⇒ address a broad range of issues with families
- ⇒ inform families about what supports are available and where
- ⇒ link families to the services they need as soon as possible - to prevent problems escalating or becoming entrenched
- ⇒ move towards ‘seamless’ support for families or breaking down traditional program structures of departments
- ⇒ identify gaps in services
- ⇒ review how we support families in light of ongoing research and evaluation findings.

So that we can organise services to meet the needs of children, families and communities, the networks will be arranged around four fields of activity.

Support for parents who are expecting or caring for a new baby.

The focus is on support for families during pregnancy and the first 12 months of a child's life. The types of services involved are: antenatal support by a range of health professionals and doctors; and early childhood health services.

Support for parents who are caring for infants and young children.

The focus is on helping parents understand what their children need during the critical first three years. The services can include: trained volunteers supporting new parents; parenting information; structured education programs; education programs such as 'Parents as Teachers'; structured playgroups; parent support groups and family support.

Assisting families who need extra support.

The focus is on timely professional interventions to help parents solve problems before they become entrenched. The services include: child and family health services; mental health services; drug and alcohol services; family support services; counseling; specialist education and disability services.

Strengthening the connections between communities and families.

The focus is on disadvantaged communities, and connecting families with each other for support. Programs included are: Schools as Community centres and those run by Neighbourhood Centres; Neighbourhood Improvement Programs run by the Department of Housing; programs based on community need e.g. baby-sitting clubs, food co-ops.

The umbrella and the network of services it shades, will be evaluated over the long term to gauge its impact on children, families and communities.

What changes are needed to how we support families?

Let me firstly acknowledge that some agencies in various locations across NSW are providing services that are consistent with the approach of Families First. Families First is about validating these approaches and consistently applying them across NSW.

For other services, however, staff will need to rethink how they support families and make decisions about what changes are required.

Some of the changes in service provision that are expected as a result of Families First include:

- more home-based support for new mothers by health professionals and volunteers
- more referrals of families from early childhood nurses to other support services, for example to volunteer services, structured playgroups or family support services
- *staff of various disciplines working within a network of government and non-government services to link families to supports that best meet their needs;*

- finding new ways to reach those families that don't traditionally access services
- delivering services to families in various settings, for example in homes, centres and community settings
- where it will make a difference to families, co-locating services provided by different agencies
- more community development projects aimed at increasing families' feeling of connectedness with the community and usage of services
- sending consistent messages and advice from Government about parenting
- importantly, joint planning in communities for families across the range of Government and non-government agencies

Forward Direction for Families First

Families First is now being implemented in three areas of NSW: the Mid North Coast, the Far North Coast, and South West Sydney. It will be implemented in all areas of NSW over the next four years with existing resources and additional funding of \$54.2 million.

In the Mid North Coast, Far North Coast, and South West Sydney, the regional heads of departments have agreed to how Families First will be implemented, and service priorities.

The priorities this financial year are to expand home visiting for families by early childhood nurses and health professionals. Health is also developing strategies to support those women who are pregnant but not accessing services.

The Department of Community Services has advertised for non-government services to set up volunteer programs. The successful Schools as Community approach will start in some communities. Regional staff are working with Aboriginal communities to pilot different ways to support families. Services are also organising themselves into networks.

Each financial year 3 more areas will start implementing Families First. The Human Services Directors-General have agreed that the next three Areas in NSW are Orana Far West, Hunter and Inner West (Sydney).

No one is suggesting that implementing Families First will be easy. For staff it requires rethinking how families are supported and making the necessary changes.

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