SDN Children's Services
Achieving Greater Social Inclusion

March 2008 submission

SDN Children's Services contribution to the federal government's aim to achieve greater social inclusion

1. Introduction

SDN Children's Services (SDN) is a well established and well respected not for profit provider of early childhood education and care, as well as services for children with disabilities, Aboriginal children, family support services and advisory/consultancy/resourcing services to other providers on the inclusion of children from a range of 'at risk' categories. We started life in 1905 as the Sydney Day Nursery Association, later becoming the Sydney Day Nursery and Nursery School Association in the 1930s and SDN Children's Services in the late 1990s. SDN started because women such as Marguerite Fairfax, Mrs Frank Davenport, Dorothea McKellar and others wanted to provide a safe haven for children of low income earning mothers in the inner city of Sydney. SDN has always seen its provision of high quality, innovative early childhood education and care in the context of supporting struggling families and improving the conditions in which children are raised. Its first mission statement was 'To preserve family life, to educate mothers and to save children from death and from becoming state wards.'

SDN is in touch with thousands of children and families. We currently run 21 centres where 3,000 children each year are provided with a preschool program integrated into a long day care environment. In our State DoCS funded *Brighter Futures* Program we support up to 250 families and integrate their children (via a 'scholarship' pathway) into our own and 40 other partner centres. Our Federally funded *Inclusion Support Agencies* resource and support 1,000 other providers of children's services, and over 1,000 children are provided with a preschool education through support from SDN's DoCS funded *Supporting Children with Additional Needs (SCAN)* program.

We know intimately the gaps that exist for families struggling with their parenting and who are not active social or economic participants in mainstream society. Many of these families have found themselves locked out of mainstream or even specialized sources of support due to lack of knowledge, fear, cost, geographical isolation and/or cultural factors or when they just don't fit the criteria of one government program or another. We have sought to address these barriers as best we can from our own resources, innovative programs and funding from private foundations (such as the Jenour and Vincent Fairfax Family Foundations.)

2. The innovative SDN *Parent Resource Program*

2.1 Overview

The *Parent Resource Program* was one of the key approaches SDN developed to overcome barriers for socially isolated families. In 2000 SDN trialed its *Parent Resource Program* in just one SDN child care centre in inner city Sydney. It was later expanded to 6 other SDN centres (with federal funding) and now it runs in 60 services in NSW.

It has been evaluated (Taylor, 2002; Goodfellow et al, 2004) and found to achieve:
- Improved developmental outcomes for children;
- Improved parenting skills and increased parenting confidence;
- Increased social and economic participation for families;

- Greater community connectedness and integration.

2.2.Key replicable elements of the SDN *Parent Resource Program* model:
The model includes four core elements that were added to the service delivery of mainstream early childhood education and care services:
- **A scholarship** which made child care **affordable** for families (and which had three conditions: a fee of $5 a day still payable; the child's attendance must be regular and within core hours and parent/s must participate in a parenting education program);

- **Parenting education** for the families (openly available to all families in the centre);

- **Training and support** for the child care staff (to ensure scholarship **families were welcomed** and understood);

- **Time** for selected child care staff to participate in local agency networks and make **home visits** as needed.

2.3 What contributed to the model's success?
2.3.1 Impact of the model's design
The model works with **multiple layers** of human experience, and addresses multiple social challenges, **simultaneously.** It is this aspect of the SDN *Parent Resource Program* that is unique and has attracted such widespread interest.

The model operates concurrently and not sequentially, with the benefits experienced by one layer flowing on and making benefits in another layer more likely. The model:
- **improves child development** outcomes (through regular attendance in a high quality early childhood development environment); **and**
- **enhances** individual **parents' skills and confidence**, through participation in formal group and informal learning sessions; **and**
- **builds social networks** for isolated families, as they participate in the welcoming life of the centre, attend centre functions and events like working bees, join the centre committee, listen to and learn from the parenting struggles of 'normal' families and make friends; **and**
- **increases** scholarship **families' work readiness,** initially through the drop off and pick up requirement of the scholarship, then through developing self confidence and increased social networks and finally being able to take advantage of opportunities to undertake study and training while children are at the centre; **and**
- **enhances local community connectedness** within neighborhoods and among local agencies.

As all three levels - child, family and local community - are being affected simultaneously the benefits are multiplied and significant (Stanley, 2003; Wise, 2001).

2.3.2 Benefits related to the early childhood education platform

There are several particular benefits that derive from the nature of the early childhood education service platform. These are:
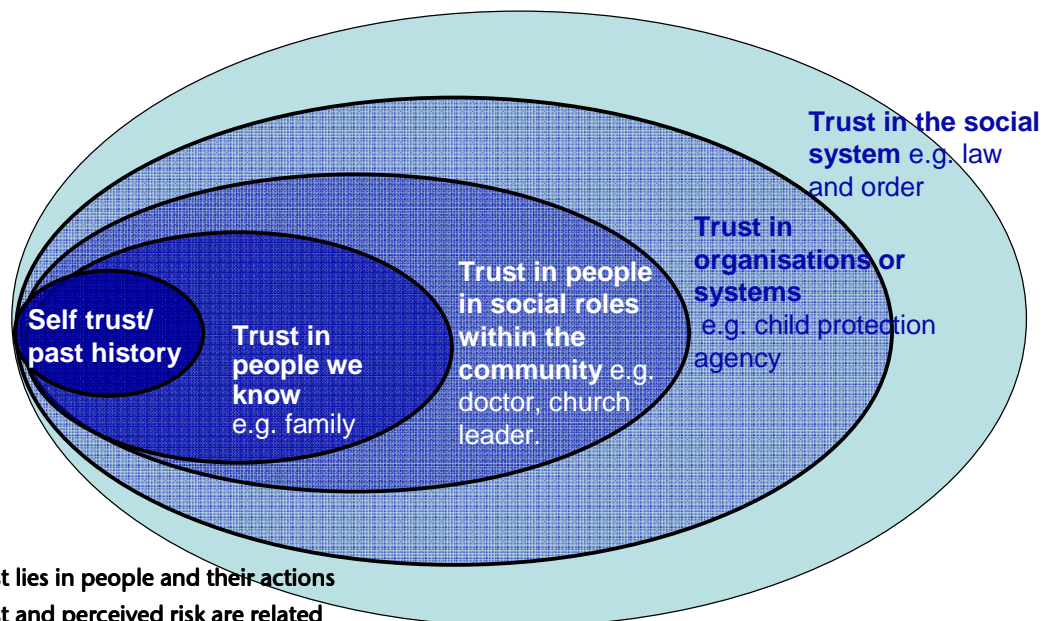
- The focus of service delivery is the **child.** Parents more easily engage with a service which does not put them under scrutiny as the main client.

- Centres are **non-stigmatising,** universally available services which do not imply that families are or have 'problems.' It is a normalising activity for a child to attend 'kindy' and allows isolated families to find a pathway into a mainstream community. This should not be underestimated. Many of the families who participated in SDN's *Parent Resource Program* reported feeling 'normal' for the first time in a long time.

- Furthermore non-stigmatising, non-targeted services have been demonstrated to be **more successful** in attracting vulnerable families (Stratham, 1997; Tomison, 2002), while also reinforcing the view that help-seeking is everyone's right (Harbin and McNulty, 2000).

- Early childhood education and care centres are responsive and **flexible** and are able to adapt to the needs of the families who attend. One *Parent Resource Program* parent reflected that her participation in the program gave her the opportunity to recover from years of physical and mental exhaustion that had eroded her ability to think and plan. For the first three months when her daughter was in the centre she was actually able to have the first relaxed sleep she had ever had. She was able to renew her own physical strength so that she had the mental capacity to start to get her life in order. A structured program with strict guidelines may not have worked for this family.

- Long day care centres in particular allow intervention and help (for families and children) to be **accessed as early** as possible. Staff in the SDN *Parent Resource Program* have had experiences of helping parents to wean children off constant bottles of cordial, and helping children learn to walk who have been constrained in walkers for most of the day. If these issues weren't addressed as early as they were, damage to the child's development could have become irreversible.

- **The group setting** of the centre allows parents to gain an understanding of normal child development (through the parenting groups and just seeing all the children together at the centre) leading to more appropriate expectations of behaviour.

- The **food and nutrition** supplied in long day care centres is another important aspect. This is just part and parcel of the service provision but is so crucial to vulnerable families and children.

- Centres are also **well connected** to other agencies and services that families can be referred to. Additionally many centres invite health professionals into the centre to make assessments and provide guidance to staff and families alike.

Because this is done in the caring, relaxed environment of a centre where families begin to feel they belong, we have found that this kind of help is more easily accepted.

- The **community life** that families become involved in becomes an important contributor in its own right to the inclusion processes. For example one parent in the *Parent Resource Program* had stopped coming to the centre. After the Centre Manager called round to visit her, she said that that no-one had ever checked up on her like that, just to find out what was wrong instead of to 'rouse' on her.

- **Trust and continuity** of relationships is essential. It is the establishment of trust through the continuity of staff and service provision that builds the basis from which change can happen. A model (developed by J.Goodfellow, 2007) of how this applies in this context is reproduced below.

an ecological trust framework
(adapted from the work of Sztompka, a Polish sociologist)

Trust in the social system e.g. law and order

Trust in organisations or systems e.g. child protection agency

Trust in people in social roles within the community e.g. doctor, church leader.

Trust in people we know e.g. family

Self trust/ past history

- **Trust lies in people and their actions**
- **Trust and perceived risk are related**
- **'Trust culture' (e.g. coherence, stability, transparency, familiarity and accountability) may vary over time, between individuals and across communities**
- **Degree of trust rises with extent of trustworthiness of information about the trustee.**

3. The history of the model

The SDN *Parent Resource Program* was funded initially by the Federal Government after a visit to an SDN centre by the then Federal minister, Jocelyn Newman, in 1999. It was later expanded to six centres under the Federal Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. In late 2003 after media attention on the effectiveness of this approach (Horin, 2003) and external evaluation by Macquarie University (Taylor, 2002) SDN won the Early Childhood section of the National Child Protection awards granted by the Commonwealth's Australian Council for Children and Parenting (ACCAP).

The NSW Department of Community Services *Brighter Futures* program (of which is SDN is one of 14 Lead Agencies) has incorporated some of the elements of SDN's *Parent Resource Program* (such as child care placement) into this recent state based early intervention program. SDN currently runs a variation of *Parent Resource Program* in 60 early childhood education and care services in NSW; and in the FaHCSIA funded Child Care Links project at the SDN Child and Family Learning Centre at Riverwood (visited by Jenny Macklin in 2007).

Over nearly ten years, SDN Children's Services has evaluated and demonstrated that this innovative approach has achieved positive advances in social inclusion for families and greater participation in early childhood education for struggling and challenged families, some of whom are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander. It has also come to the attention of the WA Department of Communities who has also implemented elements of this approach with success. It has been shown that it can be taken to scale.

4. Evidence and theoretical base of the model

The model was developed and is currently run on the evidence provided by a range of research findings, including:

- The effectiveness of early intervention for children and families (Heckman, 2006; Hertzman, 2002; McCain and Mustard, 1999; Mustard, 2002; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2002);
- Findings from neuroscience and early brain development (Perry, 1996);
- Protective and risk factors work by Ross Homel (National Crime Prevention, 1999);
- Ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2004*)* and socio-cultural (Rogoff, 2003) theories of human development that recognise the interconnectedness of social systems, and
- The critical nature of families on children's later development, (Dunst, 2000; Irwin, Siddiqi and Hertzman, 2007).

It is also underpinned by principles of social inclusion, participation and work 'readiness.' There is a recognition in the model that social and economic participation are linked (van der Gaag, 2002).

5. Pedagogical framework

The early childhood education program provided for the children is of the highest quality, reflecting current notions of children as **civic participants** (Nimmo, 2002; Nuttal and Edwards, 2007; OECD, 2006) It is delivered by early childhood teachers working with well trained child care workers, who also liaise with and involve professionals of

other disciplines. An integrated system needs 'integrated workers' (Moss, 2006a, p.32; Cameron 2004).

The provision of learning opportunities for families is based on principles of adult education and self directed learning. Importantly all staff are committed to principles of social justice and social inclusion and can work in a 'holistic' way (Moss, 2006b) and are skilled in establishing rapport with a range of children and families (Tait, 2001).

6. Extensions into Aboriginal communities

Later iterations of this model (currently jointly funded by the NSW Department of Community Services for 250 families across 60 centres, together with the FAHCSIA Indigenous Children's Program and the private Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation) have involved the development of additional elements such as Aboriginal scholarships, Aboriginal specific playgroups, and an Aboriginal Project Coordinator who provides additional resourcing to our centre staff and an Aboriginal Resource Officer. These people, together with a range of other particular engagement strategies (such as the employment of Aboriginal staff in our centres) have enhanced and increased the involvement of Indigenous families in SDN's centres and programs.

SDN is currently collecting information on how these strategies have been viewed by the Aboriginal families and staff and what has made these strategies successful.

7. Conclusion

Cost effective, sustainable changes in the social participation of children and families are possible because the model capitalises on the standard activities and existing infrastructure of an existing service system: early childhood education and care centres. Essentially the *Parent Resource Program* model makes the benefits of high quality early childhood education available to children and their families who most need it and who will most benefit from it (McCartney et al, 2007). For these families, early childhood education isn't just the icing on the cake, it's the cake itself that is going to be instrumental in improving their own and their children's social and economic outcomes.

SDN's *Parent Resource Program* model has the ability to be implemented more widely by the non government sector as an effective community based social inclusion strategy, with particular impact in 'at risk' populations. We highly commend it to the government's attention and consideration.

8. References

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Bronfenbrenner, U. (2004). *Making human beings human: Bioecological perspectives on human development*. London: Sage.

Cameron, C. (2004). *Building an integrated workforce for a long-term vision of universal early education and care*. London: Daycare Trust, Thomas Coram Research Unit. Retrieved 23 November 2005 from www.daycaretrust.org.uk.

Daycare Trust. (2007). *Findings from Listening to Families research* (October 2006 – May 2007). Retrieved 30 January 2009 from http://daycaretrust.org.uk.

Dunst, C. J. (2000). Revisiting 'Rethinking early intervention'. *Topics in Early Childhood Special Education, 20*(2), 95-104.

Goodfellow, J. (2006a). *Parents speaking out: Stories of parents in SDN Children's Services Parent Resource Program*. Redfern, NSW: SDN Children's Services.

Goodfellow, J. (2006b). Early intervention and the sensitivities of 'vulnerable' families. *Developing Practice, 17*, 32-39.

Goodfellow, J. (2007). Recognising resilience and the importance of trust: Finidngs from the oral histories of socially and economically challenged families. Paper presented at the *15th Annual Conference of Australian Research in Early Childhood Education*, Monash University, Frankston, January 2007.

Goodfellow, J. , Bibby, A (2007). *Child Care Resource Officer (CCRO) role within SDN's Brighter Futures Program*. SDN Children's Services.

Goodfellow, J., Camus, S., Gyorog, D., Watt, M., & Druce, J. (2004). *"It's a lot different now". A description and evaluation of an innovative family support program within SDN's mainstream early childhood services.* Redfern, NSW: SDN Children's Services.

Harbin, G.l. & McNulty, B.A. (1990), Policy implementation: perspectives on service coordination and integrating cooperation. In S.J. Meisels & J.P. Shonkoff (Eds.), *Handbook of early childhood intervention.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Heckman, J. (2006). *The economics of investing in early childhood. Prevention: Invest now or pay later*. NIFTeY National Conference, Sydney 8-9 February, 2006.

Hertzman, C. (March, 2002). *An early child development strategy for Australia? Lessons from Canada.* Paper presented at Commission for Children and Young People seminar. Sydney.

Horin, A. (2003). 'Pay for play helps to spread the benefits of child care'. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 May, 2003, p. 3.

Irwin, L.G., Siddiqi, Q., & Hertzman, C. (2007). *Early child development: A powerful equalizer*. Final report for the World Health Organization's Commission on the Social Determinants of Health. Retrieved 21 August 2007 from http://www.who.int/social_determinants/resources/latest_publications/en/index.html

McCain, M.N. & Mustard, J.F. (1999). *Reversing the real brain drain: Early years study final report.* Ontario: Publications Ontario.

McCartney, K., Dearing, E., Taylor, B.A. & Bub, K.L. (2007). Quality child care supports the achievement of low-income children: Direct and indirect pathways through caregiving and the home environment. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology, 28*(5-6), *411-426.*

Moss, P. (2006a). Farewell to childcare? *National Institute Economic Review, 195,* 70-83.

Moss, P. (2006b). Structures, understandings and discourses: Possibilities for re-envisioning the early childhood worker. *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood, 7*(1), 30-41.

Mustard (2002). Early child development and the brain – the base for health, learning and behaviour throughout life. In M.E. Young (Ed.). *From early child development to human development.* Proceedings of a World Bank conference on Investing in Our Children's Future (pp.23-61).Washington: World Bank.

National Crime Prevention (1999). *Pathways to prevention: Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia.* Barton, ACT: Attorney-General's Department.

Nimmo, J. (2002). Nurturing the spirit to teach: commitment, community and emergent curriculum. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood, 27*(2), 8-12.

Nuttall, J. & Edwards, S. (2007). Theory, policy and practice: three contexts for the development of Australasia's early childhood curriculum documents. In L. Keesing-Styles & H. Hedges, *Theorising early childhood practice: Emerging dialogues* (pp. 3-25). Castle Hill, NSW: Pademelon Press.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and development (OECD) (2006). *Starting Strong II: Early childhood education and care.* Paris: OECD Publications.

Perry, B.D. 1996. Incubated in terror: Neurodevelopmental factors in the "cycle of violence". In J.D. Osovsky, ed. *Children, Youth and Violence: Searching for Solutions.* New York: Guildford Press.

Rogoff. B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Shonkoff, J.P., & Phillips, D.A. (2000). *From neurons to neighbourhoods: the science of early childhood development.* Washington: National Academy Press.

Stanley, F. (2003). *It takes a village to raise a child. Do stronger communities lead to stronger young people and a stronger society?* Paper presented to the Communities in Control conference, convened by Our Community and Catholic Social Services. Melbourne.

Swick, K.J. & Williams, R.D. (2006). An analysis of Bronfenbrenner's bio-ecological perspective for early childhood educators: Implications for working with families experiencing stress. *Early Childhood Education Journal, 33*(5), 371-378

Tait, P. (2001*). An occupational and functional map of the UK parenting and education support sector.* North Yorkshire: PAULO the national training organisation for community based learning and development.

Taylor, J. (2002). *Evaluation of the SDN Children's Services Waterloo Parent Resource Program.* Redfern, NSW: SDN Children's Services.

van der Gaag, J. (2002). From child development to human development. In M.E. Young (Ed.). *From early child development to human development.* Proceedings of a World Bank conference on Investing in Our Children's Future (pp. 63-68). Washington: World Bank

Wise, S. (2001). Creating 'child-friendly' communities: A strategy to reclaim children from risk. *Australian Journal of Social Issues*. 36(2), p.153.

Appendix I
More on achieving social and economic inclusion through an 'ecological' approach

One system alone, such as education can do very little (or at least its efforts are hampered or undermined) if a family has poor, insecure or no housing for example. Families in these situations are like refugees in their own country, with no secure foundation to base a healthy family life on.

Similarly if a well dressed Aboriginal person wanting to return home with their shopping from the Broadway shops in the CBD of Sydney, can't even hail a taxi (as we have witnessed) then what expectation would they have of receiving any other 'services' in a respectful way.

These issues can't be ignored as they are the context in which families raise children and either see their community and its agencies as being helpful to them and trusted as a source of guidance if things go awry; or as part of the many problems they must deal with on a daily basis.

The concept of working within embedded systems and the impossibility of working in isolated levels of a system is what the ecological approach is all about. This approach has been articulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 2004) and applied to work with children and families by Swick and Williams (2006). The following is an extract from SDN's investigation of the SDN-developed Child Care Resource Officer role within the SDN *Brighter Futures* program.

"Bronfenbrenner's ecological model provides a view of five nested systems of interaction that form up the child's world with each providing a contextual influence on the child. For the purposes of the investigation documented in this report, the explanation provided by Swick & Williams (2006) seems to be most appropriate. They identify the five systems as follows:

1. The **child is at the centre of the model** which views development as situated within a context of relationships.

2. At the next level, the **child is nested within the family**. This is the context for the development of the child's early relationships and the child's nurturing and learning. While the caring relationships between the child and parent help influence the child's personality, studies in the neurosciences also suggest that early social/environmental influences can have a significant impact on the child's overall development. The child's earliest trust-building is formed through attachment behaviours.

The child indirectly experiences their family's well-being. If the child's early encounters with their environment are ones of abuse and violence then these can have a negative impact on the child. Therefore, the child can experience situated stress emanating from such things as tension in the home environment, abuse and domestic violence. While there may be a physical distance between the child in child care and their parent, the child may still experience psychological 'stress' that they carry with them into the child care environment.

3. At a larger systems level and nested around family circumstances are the social and cultural beliefs and values that impact on family life. These things influence how the family functions and engages in relationships with others in the community. At this level, **services and support systems (e.g. early childhood services) within the community can assist in holding the family together**.

4. Further to this are services that can link families up to a **network of support systems**. For example, a child care centre can link a family up to other agencies in the community who can assist that family. When there is evidence of a caring community that is aware of members (e.g. a church community) then there is the potential for members of that community to 'look out' or care for each other.

5. Permeating these four nested systems and the dynamics of family life is **the historical context** of family relationships and the stressors that society may place on family life. For example, poverty brought about by unemployment may impact adversely on the family and lead to poor health, difficulties in gaining suitable accommodation and subsequent abuse.

While each family experiences stress in a different way, a brief look at systems theory quickly illustrates how an ecological model that is nested within relationships readily portrays the need to have an integrated approach to working with vulnerable families. In order to be supportive and caring of families, Swick & Williams (2006) argue that professionals need to understand the cultural, social, economic and educational dynamics that fall within the various systems that form the ecology of family life. That is, we need to become sensitive to the less evident cultural forces that impact on how the family functions. In working with these families, staff need to be able to gain insight into the parent/family perspective and find ways of relating to and working with the family. This requires responsiveness to the expressed needs of the family and the development of a partnership approach in working with the family in order to foster family empowerment. At a professional level, it also requires staff who directly relate to the family to continually reflect on the nature of their relationships with the family." (Goodfellow and Bibby, 2007, p.2-3)

The benefit of early childhood education and care as a preventative measure

There are so many resources in the local community that are trusted sources of support, early on for families. But one has been overlooked is the system of early childhood education and care.

It is the reliability and continuity of early childhood education and care services (and the ability of their staff to build trusting relationships with families) that is one of the most important contributors to their effectiveness.

"(Scholarship) parents in the (mainstream early childhood education and care)services (researched by SDN) identified how they were able to bring about changes in their lives through the support provided by early childhood staff with whom they felt they had developed a trusting relationship (Goodfellow, 2006a; 2006b). Where trust was evident, parents were more likely to attend parenting sessions; share information about their child and family circumstances; consult with staff about their children; and, discuss children's challenging behaviours. Further, parents were more likely to cooperate with centre staff in seeking support from community agencies.

These views on trust and continuity of care that were reported through the SDN *Parent Resource Program* were also evident in the results of Department of Education and Skills funded project - 'Listening to Families' - recently undertaken by the Daycare Trust in the UK (2007). This investigation of the parents' perspectives on their use of child care found that parent's views of child care were largely influenced by the child care workers with whom they came

into contact. Where parents had developed a trusting relationship then there were more able to communicate with the child care staff about issues or grievances." (Goodfellow and Bibby, 2007, p.1-2.)

It is SDN's experience that for these trusting relationships to be developed and sustained, especially with families whose own life difficulties can spill over into challenging behaviour, staff need to be well trained **and** provided with extra support. SDN was the instigator of early childhood teachers being employed in long day care centres in NSW (since the 1930s), and was influential in this requirement being incorporated into the DoCS State Regulations that now cover all long day care providers (not for profit and for profit) in NSW. This standard of quality should not be overlooked or taken for granted. It is a key component of the service system for children and families in NSW and NSW is the only state/territory that makes the employment of early childhood teachers a requirement of licensing of child care centres with 30 or more children.