

# Support for children at risk or with special needs

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### **Stronger Families and Communities Strategy**

The new Stronger Families and Communities Strategy was launched in April 2004 and focuses on early childhood (0–5 years) through early intervention, prevention and capacity building initiatives, which support and strengthen Australian families and communities by working with them to identify solutions to their local issues. The strategy is guided by the latest research and the consultation feedback from the National Agenda for Early Childhood (see below). The Australian Government has committed \$490 million to the strategy for 2004–09.

Projects under the Stronger Families and Communities Strategy have included a focus on supporting families, including those affected by mental illness. Examples of these kinds of projects include:

- the T.E.A.M Health project in the Northern Territory, providing a support worker to help parents with mental illnesses;
- the Families 4 Life 2 project in Queensland, providing in-home support to parents with mental health problems and aiming to prevent parenting problems and child abuse;
- the Centacare Me and My Family project, supporting children whose parents are affected by mental health problems or mental illness;
- the Ruah Inreach project, promoting coordination between services for children of parents with a mental illness; and
- the Early Intervention for Children at Risk and Effective Parenting for Families with Complex Needs, which aims to improve the lives of children at risk of a range of health, mental health and social problems, and to develop effective parenting strategies.

### **Playgroups**

Financial support is also provided for playgroups for families with children under school age. The activities at playgroups focus on interactive play and socialising, and help parents or carers to develop their own skills and confidence as well as those of their children. Supported playgroups are assisted by a facilitator and target linguistically and culturally diverse families, Indigenous families, families with mental health problems or mental illness, and teenage-parent families.

FaCS provides funding for mainstream playgroups to State and Territory playgroup associations. These associations assist people to find a playgroup that meets their needs, especially if a family has a special need such as a child with a disability or specific cultural requirements. The playgroup associations also provide advice to people about starting their own playgroup and, where necessary, provide dispute resolution advice.

There is currently a three-tiered approach to playgroup services.

- *Mainstream playgroups* are self-managed by the parents/carers who use these playgroups. Around 92 000 families per annum currently access about 8 100 mainstream playgroups. Funding is \$1.8 million per annum (excluding GST).
- *Supported playgroups* are those assisted by a facilitator and target linguistically and culturally diverse families, Indigenous families, families with mental health issues, and teenage-parent families.
- *Intensive playgroups* target particularly disadvantaged families, including families in insecure housing. Intensive playgroups are a focus for community development, which can lead to the development of a wider range of services in support of families with children such as introduction to education and back-to-work programs. Around 80 children access eight intensive playgroups per week.

### **Child Care Benefit**

Child Care Benefit (CCB) is designed to assist families to pay for child care. CCB is available to all families for up to 20 hours of approved child care, regardless of the reason for the child care. Families can get CCB for up to 50 hours of approved child care per child per week, for each week that one parent receives Carer Allowance for a child, or both parents (or sole parent) are in any of the following categories: working; voluntary work; looking for work; studying; or training.

Families will also be eligible for more than 20 hours (generally up to 50 hours) of CCB where:

- the family receives the carer allowance for a child with a disability, paid by the family assistance office (FAO);
- both parents (or a sole parent) in the family have a disability;
- the child is or was at risk of neglect or abuse; or
- the child's family is or was in exceptional circumstances.

### **Special Child Care Benefit**

Special Child Care Benefit (SCCB) is additional assistance that can be provided for a child at risk of serious abuse or neglect and in exceptional cases where a family's income does not truly reflect their capacity to pay the normally charged fee. SCCB can be used to pay up to the full fee charged. Services can approve SCCB subject to certain limits.

## **The National Early Childhood Agenda**

The Australian Government is working closely with state and territory governments to finalise the National Agenda for Early Childhood, which is a framework for national action to ensure all Australian children have the best possible start in life. The National Agenda seeks to strengthen prevention and early intervention approaches within and across levels of government, and the non-government sector, to maximise current and future investment to improve child development, health and wellbeing outcomes. Four key action areas are proposed in the draft framework: healthy young families, early learning and care, supporting families and parents, and child-friendly communities.

One of the National Agenda objectives identified under the key action area “healthy young families” is the need for greater attention to the early detection and treatment of women at risk of or with post-natal depression, including during the antenatal period. Attachment theory and neuropsychological research shows there is good evidence that infants of women who suffer from post-natal depression are less likely to experience secure attachment to their mother as the primary care giver during a sensitive time of rapid brain development and this may have long lasting effects, including poor social outcomes later in life. Suggestions for improving early detection and treatment included:

- greater continuity of care, especially by health professionals, across the antenatal and postnatal period;
- home visiting, extended for those families identified as at risk of poor outcomes; and
- timely access to consistent, up-to-date and quality parenting information (draft framework for the National Agenda for Early Childhood: Healthy Young Families).

A principle of the draft framework for the National Agenda is "additional help for those children most in need so they may have the same life opportunities as other children". Young children of parents with mental health problems (often associated with substance misuse problems) was one group of children identified during consultations on the National Agenda as being particularly vulnerable to poor outcomes. Suggestions for improving life opportunities of these children included:

- ensuring access to quality early interventions such as home visiting, playgroups, and early childhood education programs which, the evidence suggests, can improve outcomes and help compensate for a disadvantaged home environment;
- early detection and intervention for children with or at risk of behavioural problems (which may be associated with parental mental health problems);
- family support including, early detection and intervention for parents with a mental health problem, quality care arrangements, parenting education and information supports, relationship support, and assistance to ensure stable housing and financial security for children (associated with chronic mental health problems and during crisis); and
- professional development and networking to assist professionals to understand the impact of parental mental health problems on child development and ensure a holistic 'family' response. For example when parents undergo treatment, the needs of their children are also assessed and appropriate referrals are made.