

Communities for Children Bendigo



Child and Family Liaison Project

2015-2019

Project Impacts and Insights

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1) INTRODUCTION

During the reimagining of the Communities for Children Bendigo (C4C Bendigo) in 2014 and the development of the C4C Bendigo Strategic Action 2015-2017 it was identified that many families involved with Integrated Family Services in Bendigo were not engaged with universal early years services and in particular were not accessing the support of maternal child health services. To help address this issue the Child and Family Liaison project was developed.

The aims of the Child and Family Liaison project were:

- To ensure that families with children aged 0 to 5 years who linked to family support services and child protection are supported in engaging with maternal & child health services.
- To build a greater understanding across maternal child health services and family support services of the issues which are impacting on vulnerable families in accessing maternal child health services and other universal services.
- To build ongoing structures and processes that ensures that the most vulnerable families involved with family support services and child protection are linked to maternal & child health services and other universal children's services and vice-versa.
- To develop professional linkages and training opportunities between maternal & child health services and family services/child protection.

The project employed Kay Lehane, Maternal Child Health Nurse (MCHN) from the City of Greater Bendigo's Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Services team, to work closely with family support agencies in Bendigo. These agencies include Bendigo Community Health Services, Bendigo District Aboriginal Co-operative and Anglicare Victoria. The role of the project worker included undertaking joint assessments with family services workers, linking families to maternal and child health services and other early years services, providing secondary consultation to family services workers, delivering training to workers on child development, building linkages between Family Services and Maternal & Child Health Services and supporting the Maternal Child Health Nurse Family Services Exchange Program.

Significant progress has been made through Kay's work in building better linkages between Family Support services, Child FIRST and Maternal & Child Health Services. The progression of this work has coincided with sector changes for both Maternal Child Health Services and Family Services. The Victorian State Government's Early Childhood Reform Plan is investing heavily in expanding Maternal Child Health Services to further support access for families particularly those

at risk of family violence, expansion of the Enhanced Maternal Child Health Service and MCHN professional development. Alongside the Early Childhood Reform, the Roadmap for Reform: Strong Families, Safe Children aims to deliver a families services system that: strengthens communities to better prevent neglect and abuse, delivers early support to children and families at risk, keeps more families together through crisis and secures a better future for children who cannot live at home. These sector changes have significant implications for work undertaken in this area and both reforms focus on professional collaboration and provide a child focussed lens.

With this changed landscape and established working relationships and processes in place between MCH and Family Services, C4C Bendigo recognised that many of the desired outcomes of the Child and Family Liaison project had been met and that the project would be finalised in June 2019.

As part of the evaluation process for the C4C Bendigo Strategic Action Plan, professional reflections by C4C project workers are gathered. These reflections focus on gathering learnings from workers on what is working and system issues that require addressing.

Kay's insights and reflections below build on the June 2016 *Child and Family Liaison Learning and Reflections* document that identified the following areas of learning and need:

- Building family support workers understanding of early childhood development
- Building the understanding within Maternal Child Health services of the skills relating to engaging with families and working within their family context and its complexities
- The need for early intervention
- Early intervention for children's language and developmental needs
- The need to recognise who has the first links with families and to add to the resource of this worker rather than necessarily adding further workers
- The need for long term work with families
- The need to build the range of mental health responses for families
- The value of co-location of enhanced maternal child health services within family support services
- The value of a team approach to working with families

2) PROJECT IMPACTS

2.1 Data

Data gathered via the Family Services Early Childhood Development Snapshot Survey highlights significant changes in the engagement of families accessing family services and universal early years services. This survey was completed each quarter by family services professionals regarding the families that they had supported during that period. While this data cannot be only attributed to the Early Childhood Development Worker or C4C Child Family Liaison positions, it certainly highlights real change in service practice and child and family experience during this period.

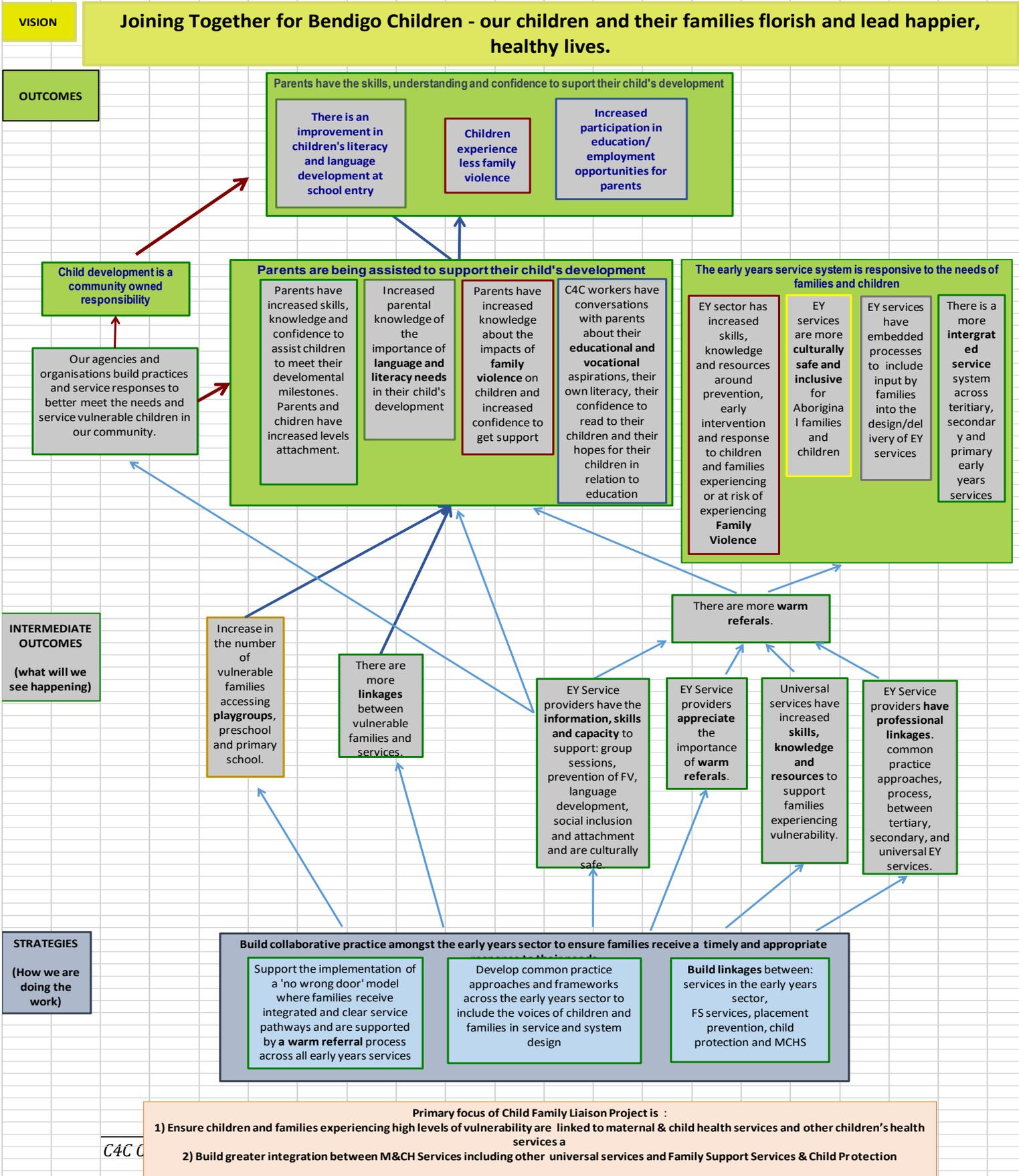
ECD SNAPSHOT SURVEY – COGB results		
Question	Jan- Mar 2015	Jul-Sep 2018
How many families with children under 5 yrs accessing MCHN?	36.36 %	73.08 %
How many families with children under 5 not accessing any universal services?	18.18 %	3.85%
How many families with children under 5 accessing supported playgroup?	0%	34.64%

2.2 Outcomes

The C4C Bendigo Theory of Change visually captures the expected and desired change as a result of the C4C Bendigo initiative. Below is an extract from the C4C Bendigo Theory of Change highlighting the outcome pathway relating to the Child & Family Liaison project. This extract allows us to see how the Child Family Liaison Project (alongside other C4C projects and broader sector work) has contributed to the C4C outcomes. The project also influenced many of the other identified outcomes as per the collaborative nature of the initiative, however those highlighted were particularly relevant to the strategies implemented in this project.

Communities for Children Bendigo Theory of Change

Child Family Liaison Project



3) PROJECT WORKER INSIGHTS

Kay Lehane

3.1 The Significance of the C4C Bendigo Approach/Collaborative Partnership

Having a role within C4C has provided an opportunity to network across agencies, worker levels and at committee meetings, giving access to resources and information exchange not otherwise available.

Knowing about the Collective Impact model and that there are a number of people with the power to effect change working to improve outcomes for children in Bendigo was enlightening and reassuring as at times the scope of the issues for children and families becomes overwhelming. It was also empowering to know that C4C took opportunities to give a voice to Bendigo's children. The successes of the other programs has been inspiring and I wish all workers could rotate through the committee meetings and virtual team meetings to understand the breadth of C4C work and connections and collaborations between projects, partners and community. I have learnt a lot from other workers:

- Persistence and "walking with" from the OATES team
- The amazing language and literacy programs and activities working to improve literacy across the community
- Voice of the Family which informs how we work with families
- The empowerment of families to be their own and their communities agents of change via the Parents for Change Advocacy group
- The Centre for Non-Violence projects work with Gender Equity to address Family Violence in the early years and the workers ability to think laterally and broadly in this area.
- Supported playgroups that actually prevent the need for further intervention and provide essential social and community connections.

Importantly I wish all workers could be exposed to working in a way that is familiar with the drivers of vulnerability and that their work may be tailored to acknowledging and supporting families with these. I think this would be a "game changer" in a way that would shift the focus from working with families to change their day to day behaviours or dealing with the stresses and chaos of life, to addressing the significant underlying issues at hand.

3.2 Relationships have impacted on family outcomes

It's all about the relationship - not just for families but also for workers. The Maternal Child Health and Family Services Exchange Program has given nurses and family services professionals the

opportunity to see and experience each other's work environments and has been greatly received by all and supported collaboration, referral and insight.

Knowing each other by face and by name has meant that we can work more closely together. Where needed we can advocate from different perspectives and observations, thereby gaining a more rounded view regarding a family situation. This may support or diffuse our concerns or confidence in their parenting confidence and their circumstances. We can work to give a consistent message to the family that does not add to their confusion with services giving conflicting advice and information.

We have been able to bring together different skill sets and provide them in a seamless way to families for greater benefit whilst at the same time broadening our own knowledge base.

Barriers have broken down and strong alliances formed between Maternal Child Health services and ChildFIRST/Family services due to increased understanding of one another's roles. This understanding includes:

- appreciating one another's professional skills and knowledge
- insight into role expectation
- increased awareness of pressures and barriers of each other's positions
- greater appreciation the various agencies cultures, strengths and areas for development
- developing a trust that allows for a more cohesive way of working with families.

3.3 Connection with Out of Home Care

The project has allowed us to be well placed to meet changes to our Enhanced Maternal Child Health Service and a good example of this is taking on Out Of Home Care (OOHC) responsibilities. As we had already developed contacts within the OOHC team via the Child Family Liaison Project position, this has allowed us to have better communication with this team and work closely as needed in this space.

Our state-wide colleagues are envious of our strong relationship with OOHC, which has been an unanticipated benefit to being a regular presence at Anglicare.

3.4 The Importance of Early Intervention

A concern that has been identified via the C4C Child and Family Liaison project is in regards to early intervention and "who" does early intervention and "how" do we maintain space for this in our busy roles? It appears we have more services engaged at the high end of need. Often there are a number of intensive services with one family and how does the debate, negotiation, rationalisation and clarification of roles and responsibilities occur at a level that can influence this across agencies?

3.5 Advocacy – Whose Role?

This project position has also recognised the gap relating to advocating for specialist services. Who lobbies for external services for those children identified as needing this? Whose role is it to advocate for specific services such as mental health (both child and parents), speech therapy, early childhood intervention services and paediatricians? There is further work to do in this space to ensure that those involved in working with children and families in these situations can confidently refer, confer and respectfully support access to specialist services. Who advocates for the issues we know exist in our system? Whether it be OOHC and children having multiple short term placements, lack of counselling or supports for children who suffer trauma, lack of suitable housing, difficulties in accessing appropriate services, restrictive service/funding criteria that mean that families have to shift programs to receive a service.

4) SUMMARY

The C4C Bendigo Child and Family Liaison project has played a significant part in supporting and enhancing the work of Family Services and Maternal Child Health Services in Bendigo.

By creating links between these services, practice has grown and positive outcomes for children and their families have increased. The development of meaningful professional relationships and processes has seen an increase in children and families accessing maternal child health services and other mainstream early year's services and this in turn has supported parenting skills and confidence.

This project allowed for Maternal Child Health and Family Services professionals to work closely and purposefully together with opportunities including:

- Service co-location,
- Joint assessments,
- Secondary consultation,
- Facilitating shared training, and
- The Maternal Child Health and Family Services Exchange Program.

These opportunities of partnership and collaboration have supported (alongside the other C4C projects) the C4C Bendigo outcomes of:

- Early Years services providers have professional linkages, common practice and processes between tertiary, secondary and universal Early Years services

- Increase in warm referrals
- Increase in linkages between vulnerable families and services
- Parents are being assisted to support their child's development
- The early years system is more responsive to the needs of families and children.

With sector changes across early years, mainstream, tertiary and specialist services to ensure a child and family focussed lens and a commitment by both Maternal Child Health and Family Services to continue to work closely together it is hoped that the legacy of the Child and Family Liaison Project continues for many years.