Let’s Start: Partnering with Aboriginal Families and Communities

Project No. SE213

How we work

Let’s Start has been trialled in many Northern Territory (NT) communities including the major centres (Darwin and Palmerston), as well as rural and remote locations such as the Tiwi communities of Bathurst and Melville Islands, Ngammarriyanga in the Victoria Daly Shire and Jabiru in the West Arnhem Shire. In delivering family support and prevention programs, it is important to be sensitive to differences between individual communities in the NT. It is also necessary for programs to adapt implementation strategies to best suit the available local resources and preferences as well as the opportunities and the energy of each community. The key to working in any community is successful engagement, building resources and forming partnerships.

Engagement means working to make contact at many levels: with agencies and organisations in communities; with community members; and with practitioners in health centres, schools, childcare centres or child welfare who work with, or are interested in, supporting families and children. Perhaps, most importantly, engagement means effectively communicating with parents to explain the program and to respond sensitively to their concerns and needs about their child and family.

In the area of family support and early intervention, it is well known that the most needy families are often those most difficult to reach and, once contacted, are less likely to be retained in any intervention. Let’s Start works with a high proportion of families who are not active users of services and who are shy or reluctant to seek outside help. Many parents may have poor literacy and few personal resources and support mechanisms. They and their families might experience multiple sources of difficulty. Such parents may only gain the confidence to join the program after one or two starts. Individualised contact through home visits, and later follow-up, help to enable contact to be easily re-established after a parent withdraws, and are aspects of engagement that have helped families in difficulty to stay in touch and eventually join a program.

Building resources and partnerships means working with services and individuals to identify resources in the community, and the agencies and individuals most able to take responsibility for running the program. We create a framework for partnerships—between, for example, the health centre, the schools and the local council—to contribute people, resources, time and space to the running of the program. Fitting the processes of program delivery to timelines of work and school, availability of childcare, paydays and local ceremonies and customs is important in the set-up of a program. Provision of training by the Let’s Start team, both in Darwin and in participating communities, provides opportunities to develop these processes. Most importantly, it is central to building a local team that understands how best to deliver the program for parents in the local community.

To ensure that the program is well resourced and coordinated, funding may be needed to secure the services of a dedicated local coordinator and community workers. Let’s Start can support community organisations wishing to identify ways to fund their program.
Different models, different contexts

Urban mainstream: networking
  - Networks of practitioners and providers: open to Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal parents; promotion through multiple channels; network of schools and agencies providing referrals; delivery at central sites.

Jabiru: strong local leadership
  - Strong local leadership by teachers and other community members who coordinate set-up, referral and program delivery; training and mentorship of delivery provided by Let’s Start team.

Tiwi Islands and remote community contexts: ‘cultural fit’
  - Local partnerships with school and health/wellbeing services.
  - Community members trained to engage families and deliver Let’s Start.
  - Delivery by the locally based team is supported by the Let’s Start team.

Key achievements
  - Around 40 urban and eight remote schools have been involved in referrals and delivery.
  - Aboriginal participation in the Let’s Start urban ‘mainstream’ program equaled the Aboriginal proportion of the greater Darwin population and shows potential for expansion.
  - In 2009 Let’s Start expanded its delivery to three new locations: Nganmarriyanga, Pirlangimpi and an Indigenous-specific program in partnership with the Darwin-based Danila Dilba Medical Service.
  - As at December 2009 more than 300 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal children had been referred to the Let’s Start program, with 150 of these children, and their parents, actively participating in the program.
  - Participation in Let’s Start:
    ◦ increases parental confidence and assertiveness, both in terms of consistency in parenting strategies and managing family issues
    ◦ leads to improvement in children’s behaviour and social skills
    ◦ supports children in the transition to school
    ◦ supports improvements in parental responsiveness and mental health.

Find the Let’s Start evaluation report at: www.cdu.edu.au/letsstart

PROJECT PUBLICATIONS

