

**LINKING EDUCATION AND FAMILIES (LEAF)
PROJECT BRIEF**

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PROJECT BRIEF

1. INTRODUCTION

This brief report on the Linking Education and Families (LEAF) program has been developed in response to recent interest in the 'community in schools' concept and an increasing focus on the developmental and educational role of services for very young children. The LEAF program is a school-based program that targets families with children aged 0-4 years. The program provides a structure for school and community collaboration with a focus on the early years. It offers support and development opportunities for families with young children and a framework for giving each child the best possible start to school.

2. BACKGROUND

The history of the program began when schools in Bunbury, Western Australia, identified a need to build closer links with children and families during transition from home to school. This is thought to be especially relevant in terms of promoting early literacy and social support and reflects a commitment by schools to enhance school readiness.

In 2005, South Bunbury Primary School accessed 'Family Links' funding to release their kindergarten teacher, Ms Fiona Farren, for one day per week for 12 months to develop strategies to connect with local families with children under 4 years. This resulted in the development of the Linking Education and Families (LEAF) program. The program provides a mechanism by which schools can make early contact with parents and families of pre-school children.

3. KEY ELEMENTS OF THE LEAF PROGRAM

The LEAF program aims to:

- Develop respectful, friendly relationships between schools and the families in our communities
- Support families by recognising that early child development is a priority for the child's future well being
- Assist families to connect to appropriate early intervention services if they are required
- Work with families and children in their homes and communities to help children make a smooth transition into their school years

The program has a universal approach and has been trialled in both public and private schools. Any family with children aged 0-4 years is welcome to attend. The program utilises existing infrastructure by offering weekly 'Play Cafés' at the school kindergarten. At Play Cafes, parents of young children can relax, share information, develop support networks, and interact with their children while they participate in

developmental learning opportunities through play. This provides an opportunity for parents to develop a partnership with the school and a relationship with the kindy teacher who facilitates Play Cafes. The kindy teacher is accessed as a resource who can provide reassurance and early child development information. This connection helps raise parental awareness of the importance of the early years and the important role that parents have in nurturing their child's development. Play Cafes also provide opportunities for parents to interact with support services such as the community child health nurse who visits several times per term.

A family visit is offered early in the school year (or alternatively in the fourth term of the year prior to kindergarten). A family visit provides an opportunity for the teacher to build a picture of the child that includes favourite things, toys and pets etc. This makes conversations much richer and rewarding and helps build a personal relationship between the teacher, child and parent. The visit also gives the kindy teacher an opportunity to learn about the child from and with their parents. Parents appreciate the opportunity to have their questions and concerns about parenting answered in the privacy of their own home.

Importantly, both home visiting and Play Cafes provide opportunities for early intervention and referral where required. The program has been instrumental in identifying issues such as speech delay, sleep problems, difficult behaviour, continence problems, sight and hearing issues and concerns with communication and language skills. The program also provides opportunities to increase understanding of family issues that could influence the child's progress at school. These can include, for example, parental mental health problems or chronic illness in the family, and shared custody issues or prolonged absences of key family members.

A formal opportunity for health screening for all children enrolled in kindergarten is provided through a kindy orientation session coordinated jointly by the kindy teacher and community child health nurse. This is a prime example of the successful partnerships and collaboration brokered through the LEAF program. At this session, the community child health nurse utilises the PEDS (Parent Evaluation of Developmental Status) survey and 3-3 ½ year check questions from the Department of Health Personal Health Record.

Parent response to this orientation opportunity and health screening has been positive. Health screening is followed on orientation day by brief talks by the community nurse and teacher regarding preparation for school. Small packs of take home information are also provided. The teacher follows up with parents who did not attend the sessions, asking them to complete the questions, which are then forwarded to the nurse. Children identified as having concerns are contacted later by the nurse, some requiring a secondary developmental screening tool, the ASQ, to be completed.

4. PHILOSOPHICAL BASE

The success of the LEAF program hinges on an understanding of partnership principles and a willingness to work collaboratively across disciplines. The LEAF program is built on a family partnership approach that recognises that respectful

relationships are just as important for achieving success as program structure and curriculum. It can be difficult for teachers to transition from a traditional expert model to a model where parents are considered to be equal partners, therefore we strongly recommend that teachers involved in the program undertake training in partnership principles. The partnership approach is widely supported by the literature (Moore, 2006; Pawl and Milburn 2006). Families vary greatly in their personal resources, levels of education, and confidence. When service providers and families work as partners, there is a greater probability that good outcomes will be achieved (Silberberg, 2001; Turnbull et al, 2000; Weissbourd, 2000). In keeping with the LEAF philosophy of developing respectful partnerships, parents are encouraged to have input into topics, guest attendances, and the day to day running of Play Cafes.

The early years have become a key focus for national and international research, and of state, commonwealth and international government agendas. Current research indicates that the LEAF model is a good fit with best practice recommendations relating to early child development and parenting programs. Professor Fraser Mustard (2008) recommends that such programs should:

- Start early
- Involve parents
- Include home visiting
- Involve qualified staff

Research on the nature of school readiness emphasises the importance of schools, services and communities in supporting children and families and providing the conditions and experiences needed to ensure that all children reach school able to take advantage of the academic and social learning experiences that schools provide. Schools have a vested interest in ensuring that children arrive at school ready to learn. The impact of children arriving at school without the skills needed to take advantage of the learning experiences provided by schools extends beyond the initial years of school: the likelihood of successfully completing school, gaining employment and becoming a productive socially adjusted citizen, can be traced back to a child's skills at school entry (CCCH Policy Brief no 10, 2008).

There are many activities that parents and schools can undertake with young children that can have a positive effect on their development and promote school readiness. The best way of preparing a child for school is to ensure that they have optimal social, emotional and learning experiences and environments during the early years, both at home and in community settings and services. Creating those optimal conditions requires collaboration between services and programs to ensure that the children and families receive all the help they need, and that potential barriers to children's learning are removed (CCCH Policy Brief no 10 -2008). While working in partnership with parents, it is also important to see families in the context of the community and the wider society, and seek to strengthen community links and utilise community resources to meet their needs (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Petr, 2004; Shorr, 1997).

5. BUILDING SCHOOL AND COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS

LEAF focuses on establishing and strengthening relationships between the families, and school and community that can support them. The interdisciplinary nature of the program assists families to more easily access a range of support services within their local community.

Steering groups support the program and have been convened in Bunbury and Harvey by community based organisation Investing In Our Youth Inc. Representatives on the steering groups include education staff, health and allied health staff, local government, the Department for Communities and members of the Indigenous community (Harvey only). This composition has proved effective with a brief list below detailing practical ways in which each agency and business have actively contributed to the project.

- The Department of Education supported Fiona Farren to develop the initial LEAF concept. Schools provide program infrastructure and line manage kindy teachers (LEAF Coordinators). Principals in each participating school have supported the program's implementation and have encouraged the development of school and community links.
- Investing In Our Youth Inc plays a general support and advocacy role and has assisted in securing funding for the program. Investing In Our Youth convenes LEAF steering group meetings and maintains a service directory for families with young children (a useful referral tool).
- The WA Country Health Service – South West approves the involvement of community child health nurses and allied health workers who add immense value to the program by sharing their expertise through visits to Play Cafes, collaborate on pre-kindy health screening, and partner in ongoing support to families with vulnerable children. The Department of Health has committed to a formal review of the feasibility, cost and effectiveness of the LEAF program.
- The Department for Communities has assisted with seeding funds for special projects eg Play Cafes at new sites, for family service directories, for home learning 'show bags', and to support promotion of LEAF at the 2009 national ARACY conference.
- The City of Bunbury has assisted with resources from the Community Safety & Crime Prevention Program to part fund the development of a LEAF training package. Harvey Shire recently provided two years of funding for LEAF at Yarloop Primary School.
- The South West Development Commission provided funding to resource the development of a LEAF training package through the 2010 Royalties for Regions funding stream.
- Local business has been pivotal in assisting to sustain the program in Collie Primary Schools.

- The project utilises early years information data bases provided through local Early Years Networks.

There are many opportunities to build on the framework of the LEAF program. The cross fertilisation of ideas across agencies has resulted in ongoing innovation and learning, and further extension of the program.

6. PROGRAM OUTCOMES

LEAF provides a supportive and welcoming environment for families from all backgrounds. Parents involved in the program report social benefits for both themselves and their children. Program evaluation outcomes are listed below:

- reduces anxiety about the transition to school
- promotes positive social development in children
- encourages children's independence and self-regulation prior to school
- positively influences the home learning environment
- increases use of services designed to support child and family development
- facilitates early intervention for a range of issues including speech, hearing, behavioral problems health problems and delayed development
- increases opportunities for parent support
- provides opportunities to promote the importance of the early years
- facilitates opportunities for interagency collaboration benefiting families with young children

Teachers note that the opportunities provided by Play Cafes to socialise and acclimatise to the Kindy environment means an anxiety free start to Kindy with few tears and parents and children that are confident and comfortable. Parents also recognise the social development benefits.

“He is an only child and goes to Kindy next year, so it's good for him to interact with other children. He loves the activities – inside and outside and there is so much for him to do. It's been particularly good for me because I am relatively new and it has given me a chance to meet people and it's given me lots of ideas. I can see improvement in his learning, and social activities, things like sharing. He is getting familiar with Kindergarten through coming regularly. The teacher is so warm and welcoming. Play Café paved the way for him to get his hearing checked and he is now getting speech therapy” (Parent).

The LEAF program has received much positive feedback, recently receiving two State awards and one National award, and has been recommended for further review and monitoring by the WA Parliamentary Education and Health Standing Committee (2009 Healthy Child – Healthy State: Improving Western Australia's Child Health Screening Programs).

7. REFERRAL DATA

The following table outlines the types of problems identified for intervention prior to commencement of kindergarten. The data includes referrals made through the kindy

orientation session and also children who were identified with issues during earlier Play Café sessions based on records kept from two schools in 2009.

Figure 1: Children with Identified Problems: LEAF Screening 2009

Number of PEDS/Questionnaires competed	School A 32	School B 35
ASQ completed	1	5
Speech concerns/referrals	3	7
Fine motor concerns/referrals	1	4
Vision concerns/referrals	2	1
Hearing concerns/referrals	4	2
At least one further consult with a community nurse(phone/ person)	11	10
Social Work referrals	0	3
Behaviour issues/Referrals	1	9
Toileting support	1	3
Multiple/complex issues	0	3

Interventions for children with concerns ranged from a brief phone call to one family requiring several home visits from both the nurse and social worker. One child from a NESB background had health screening conducted jointly with the school nurse at the health clinic using telephone interpreter service for his mother. Several families from school B completed the Group Triple P program early in 2010.

One example of the complex nature of some issues identified was child B. Child B resided with his parent, who had shared care with his other parent. B's parent identified him as having speech issues during a Play Café session. Liaison between the teacher and the nurse enabled full developmental assessment for the child, identifying multiple areas of concern, and referral to the Child Development Services. His parent was able to have several one to one sessions with the child health nurse covering behaviour management, play ideas and parenting support prior to school starting. B also required hearing and vision referrals and intervention from the feeding team.

This family was subsequently referred to social work for ongoing support. The school nurse for 2010 was fully briefed regarding this family and provided continuity of support for the parent. The teacher was aware of likely problems with this child prior to school commencing, and was reassured to know he already had speech and occupational therapy assessments in progress. Further referral to the School Psychologist and a Pediatrician followed with an eventual diagnosis of Global Developmental Delay. The child has benefitted from a supported program and is making good progress. The father reports good progress with his language and behaviour at home also. The school is now able to apply for an assistant to support the child's ongoing development.

8. ONGOING DEVELOPMENTS

8.1 PROGRAM EVALUATION

The LEAF program has been evaluated twice (Thomas, 2007; Gregg, 2008) with consistently favourable outcomes.

- Families surveyed affirm that the program successfully develops relationships between schools and families.
- The program supports families to recognise that early child development is a priority for the child's wellbeing. A range of over 60 parent information handouts were made available through Play Cafes and numerous topics of discussion were offered informally throughout the course of one year. Sample issues of interest to parents included child development, diet, play activities, language and reading, behaviour, and getting ready for kindergarten.
- The program also met the objective of assisting families to connect to appropriate early intervention services if required (see previous table).
- The objective of working with families and children in their homes and communities to help children make a smooth transition into their school years has also been effectively met. All families surveyed affirmed that the program helps children and parents feel less anxious about starting school.

It should be noted that the program evaluations conducted have been limited to reporting on outcomes that can be measured during the one year term of the evaluation (a requirement of funding providers). There is consistent evidence that children who participate in high quality pre-school programs gain significant long term benefits that include:

- higher levels of completed education and subsequent employment (CCCH Policy Brief no 10, 2008)
- greater stability in relationships and lower rates of mental health illness (CCCH Policy Brief no 10, 2008)
- reduced involvement in crime (Brown & Putt, 1999)

It is encouraging for the LEAF steering group to learn that the Child and Adolescent Community Health Service have committed to examining the feasibility, cost and effectiveness of the LEAF program in their 2010-11 operational plans.

8.2 LEAF TRAINING PACKAGE

Enquiries are often received from schools regarding information and training for the LEAF program, however delivering program information is currently limited to the availability of one trainer – the developer, Fiona Farren. Training has been offered via an intensive three day face to face training program. An important step in the development and further roll out of the LEAF program will be to develop a self-learning training package that teachers can access and complete at a time that is convenient to them. The development of a training package is currently taking place and is partly supported through the City of Bunbury and the 2010 Royalties for Regions funding stream.

8.3 ESTABLISHING A LEAF NETWORK

In response to requests from LEAF Program Coordinators, the steering committee aim to connect LEAF sites through a LEAF network in 2011. This will allow LEAF Coordinators to share information on what is working well and to receive recent updates and information. The format of the LEAF network is still under discussion but will most likely involve the development of a LEAF website, email data base with newsletter and/or quarterly meeting opportunities.

8.4 ENGAGING VULNERABLE FAMILIES

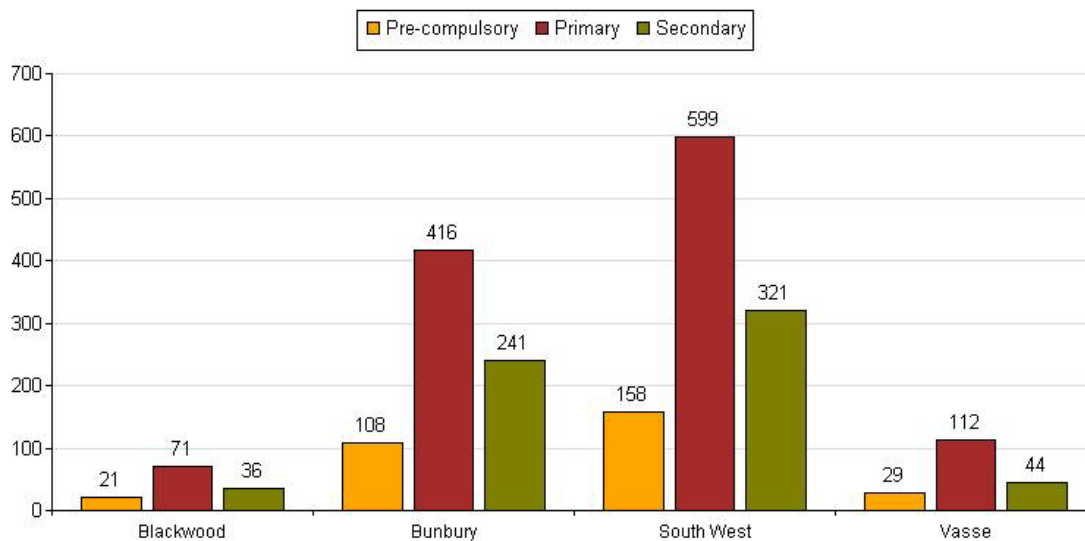
The aim of a universal program is to provide a service for all children whose families wish them to participate. A register of nationality is not currently kept for families attending Play Cafes however parents from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are attending and there is a representation of fathers there also. Several strategies have been put in place to promote LEAF to the Department for Child Protection and their clients are sometimes referred to LEAF and occasionally accompanied to the program by a Child Protection Officer.

During Aboriginal consultation for the recent 'Mapping and Gap Analysis of Human Services for Indigenous People in the South West Region' report (2009), the following information led to a **priority recommendation that the LEAF program be expanded to work with Indigenous parents in primary schools** (p78).

- Aboriginal people want mainstream services to ensure health and wellbeing for mothers and their children is a higher priority (p57).
- Aboriginal people consistently raise concerns about children's learning difficulties and problems arising from undiagnosed and untreated hearing and eye sight, and behaviour problems (p39)
- The importance of school readiness of both children and parents was raised in a number of Indigenous and agency consultations (p40)
- There was an expressed wish that schools talk to families early on before problems developed (p40)
- The establishment of genuine inter-agency programs operating from and with schools with significant Indigenous population is seen as an important issue nationally and state wide (p40)
- There is an expressed need for programs operating from schools that involve government and non-government agencies in supporting Indigenous parents and families of children aged 0-4 years (p40)
- Strategies should be developed in partnership with the Indigenous community and realistic resources sought to improve school attendance (p44)

There is a pressing need to facilitate early engagement of Aboriginal families, enhance school readiness and promote a smooth transition to school. As illustrated by the following graph, only a small proportion of Aboriginal children currently attend Kindergarten.

Figure 2 Number of Indigenous children attending school across the South West, by schooling level, semester two, 2007



Source: Department of Education and Training – Student Census Statistics

Applications have been made to resource plans to engage and serve Indigenous families through the frame work of the LEAF program, however, the additional resources requested have not been forthcoming. It would be useful to have the opportunity to trial the following engagement strategies:

- Consult with the Aboriginal Education Team and the Aboriginal Education Advisory Council (comprised of local elders and community leaders) and other Aboriginal representatives. Some redesign of the LEAF program may be necessary to ensure culturally secure service delivery.
- Increase capacity (secure additional hours) of Aboriginal and Islander Education Officers (AEIO's) so that they can perform a front line role in the LEAF program and assist in engaging local Aboriginal families.
- Provide mandatory cultural security training for LEAF program coordinators (Kindy teachers).
- Provide alternative transport options (taxi vouches, assistance from AEIO)

9. SUSTAINABILITY

The benefits of the LEAF program far outweigh the costs but consideration must still be given to the level of investment involved per school. Our recommendation is that in the first year of activity 0.2 FTE should be allocated for the role of Project Coordinator and that this role should be undertaken by an early childhood educated teacher. The first year will involve training, engagement of a steering group, partnership building and implementation of evaluation strategies. After this initial start-up period one half day per week may be sufficient for continuation of the program.

In rural areas some thought needs to be given for additional hours for community child health nurses. Rural community nurses often serve several communities and to

service several Play Cafes at various school sites will need to incorporate additional hours in travel time alone.

Pilot funding for the LEAF program was sourced in 2007 through a Department of Education and Investing In Our Youth partnership which funded a cluster of six schools in the Bunbury area through the National Community Crime Prevention Program. In 2008, the partnership was successful in accessing funds through Lotterywest for the same six schools and for Harvey Primary. Although many efforts were made to find further support by Investing In Our Youth and many appeals were made to policy makers and politicians, no further external support was found to operate the LEAF program, though some funding support has been obtained for the development of a LEAF training package.

Regretably, many of the initial pilot schools have not been able to continue to deliver LEAF. South Bunbury employs a level three kindergarten teacher and can utilise development hours associated with that role to continue with the LEAF program. Withers Primary School is situated in a low socio-economic area and therefore has access to discretionary funds that they have allocated to the LEAF program. Bunbury Primary operates the program in a reduced form, with a short block of Play Cafes. Difficulty in sustaining early year's programs is echoed in other schools who have introduced early year's initiatives. Initial resources are sometimes found to pilot a project, but continuation proves difficult, if not impossible.

Such is the enthusiasm for LEAF that many schools have demonstrated a willingness to partly meet the costs of the project if a proportion can be met from another source. Collie Primary Schools have explored business sponsorship options and have received a measure of corporate support but there are concerns that this support is time limited. This approach may have some success in Collie, a town that is well served by large scale industry investment, but would prove very difficult for clusters of schools in central Bunbury.

The sustainability of LEAF is an ongoing issue. It is a tribute to the persistence of key stakeholders that the program is still progressing. Play Cafes are attracting large numbers of parents/carers and children, with some sites reporting 60-80 families attending throughout the school year. Average attendance at Play Cafes on any given week number 25 children plus parents and carers.

10. CONCLUSION

The Linking Education and Families (LEAF) program focuses on establishing and strengthening relationships between the family, and school and community that can support them.

The program meets current best practice recommendations for early child development and parent support programs. Moreover, the service fulfils an early screening function in detecting special needs, which when identified sufficiently early, can be treated more effectively.

Families play a critical nurturing and educational role for their children, particularly in the early childhood period when brain and personality continue to form (Gerhardt,

2004). As the first educators of children, parents would like to support their child's development and learning. Many are prevented, however, by lack of time, or by underestimating the importance of the responsibility or by not knowing how they can effectively support their children's learning. LEAF can harness the power of parents and the home learning environment.

The LEAF program has shown remarkable powers of survival and adaption and continues on a journey of innovation.

Giving children a positive start will ensure they have the best possible future, and providing access to high quality early childhood education before formal school starts is the most effective way of helping all children reach their full potential.

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