

Children Communities Connections 2012 Media Release

There's a big difference between building communities *for* children and families and doing it *with* them. Families sometimes find it challenging to get support because they feel this is an admission that they've failed as parents. As we look toward building stronger communities with children and families we need to consider how we can do better as communities, service providers and policy makers in terms of providing families with the kind of support they want and need to flourish.

The Children Communities Connections 2012 conference at the University of South Australia's Hawke Centre last week brought together practitioners in the community, education and health sectors, researchers and policy makers to explore policies and practices being implemented by different levels of government and NGOs. It was convened by Salisbury Communities for Children (based at the Salvation Army Ingle Farm) in partnership with key government and non-government service providers.

Practitioners, researchers and policy makers explored some of the emerging solutions to the issues that are inflicting trauma on vulnerable children. The majority of the delegates welcomed the recently announced Royal Commission into child abuse as a significant opportunity to hear the voices of abused children and recommend changes that are needed to prevent its occurrence in the first place.

Productivity Commissioner Robert Fitzgerald challenged practitioners and researchers to come up with evidence that current initiatives are making a difference. The NSW Government has recently reintroduced the idea of schools as community hubs. He asked the question, "How do we use schools as the most important centres for the connectedness of communities?"

Flinders Centre for Science Education in the 21st Century Professor Martin Westwell presented some research findings on parental behaviour and brain development. He stressed that depriving babies and toddlers of vital stimulation is harmful as is overstimulating them through various "hothousing" techniques. While childhood factors such as socioeconomic status and IQ appear to have less impact on adult health, the development of self-control in early childhood has a huge impact.

Many parents become confused by ambiguous messages from 'experts'. Katarina Eleutheriou, National Project Manager for Engaging Parents in the Early Childhood Development Story reported on some recent research into this ambiguity. She stressed that we need to get better at communicating important knowledge to parents "It's about how messages are framed", she said. Key to this is being non-judgemental and using parent to parent communication.

"Parents don't like to be judged. They value information from other parents more than experts".

The project is auspiced by Ministers for education child development from the various states and territories. Department of Education and Child Development SA Chief Executive Dr Keith Bartley said "the initiative is founded on two critical assumptions for which there is compelling evidence."

"Parenting matters: parents are the first and primary educators of children. Brain development in the prenatal period and early years affects physical and mental health and learning in childhood and adult life".

As part of the project, a multi-layered marketing campaign pilot is being developed to share the evidence nationally with parents and caregivers.

The conference attracted some 300 participants including a large contingent from all states and territories, and brought together research and practice from a range of sectors including child and family welfare, drug and alcohol, education and mental health.

The gap between research and practice continues to loom large and was addressed by Gabriele Bammer Professor at the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Health, ANU College of Medicine, Biology and Environment at The Australian National University and research fellow at the Program in Criminal Justice

Policy and Management at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government.

Gabriele spoke about what researchers can do well and what they are not good at including "dealing with complexity, understanding systems and dealing with values conflict. No one theory can do it all".

She also brought an important distinction between "knowledge driven" researchers and "client-driven" consultants.

Former Executive Director of Drug and Alcohol Services South Australia (DASSA) Associate Professor Keith Evans addressed the challenging issue of drug and alcohol misuse.

"We spend a lot of time partitioning the problem" he said. Getting the right kind of help can be difficult".

"We know that it is lifestyle conditions creating the problems which means we need to look at a population health focus. How can we create an environment that will optimise change?"

Social Solutions Director Nairn Walker suggested the problem of creating such an environment could be addressed by building bridges out of poverty through education and relationships. To do this "we need friends, family and resources available in times of need".

"We also need role models who are nurturing to the individual and who do not engage in self-destructive behaviour."